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SHELLEY  
HIS THEORY OF POETRY

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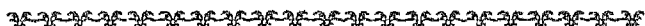
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# SHELLEY

## HIS THEORY OF POETRY



*By*  
MELVIN T. SOLVE





TO  
N. D. S.





## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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ANN ARBOR  
December, 1926



## INTRODUCTION

During nearly all the years of his short life Shelley was a subject of controversy, and during the hundred and more years which have elapsed since his death the controversy has continued, though with diminishing heat. A glance at the *Quarterly Review* for October, 1821, reveals the kind of criticism which the poet received from his contemporaries. His works "exhale contagious mischief," we read; his poetry contains the "most flagrant offenses against morality and religion." John Taylor Coleridge in the *Quarterly* for April, 1819, accused this perverted young man of loosening the hold of the venerable British laws, of poisoning fireside intimacies, and of blaspheming holy religion.

In the matter of style the critics, who still clung to eighteenth-century tenets, were not less disturbed. The reviewer of *Prometheus Unbound* in the *London Literary Gazette* found that Shelley's poetic art was "merely opposition of words, phrases, and sentiments, so violent as to be utter nonsense." The critic is amazed at the number of "colouring epithets." In seventeen lines he found "no fewer than seven positive colours, and nearly as many shades." The verse is "without measure, proportions, or elegance . . . similes are numberless and utterly inapplicable." The *Quarterly's* reviewer found the poem "absolutely and intrinsically unintelligible. . . . In Mr. Shelley's poetry all is brilliance, vacuity, and confusion . . . both the ear and the understand-

ing are disgusted by new and uncouth words, and by awkward and intricate construction of sentences."

But however unintelligible and uncouth Shelley's style may have seemed at first, the critics and the public capitulated to its seductive charms long before they were willing to tolerate the poet's social doctrines. John Wilson seems to have been the first of these equivocal critics. In *Blackwood's* he describes the author of *The Revolt of Islam* as a weak and worthless philosopher; but as a *poet* he is "strong, nervous, original; well entitled to take his place with the great creative masters." *Blackwood's* apostrophized *Prometheus* as a "most pestiferous mixture of blasphemy, sedition and sensuality," yet confessed that all who read the poem attentively were forced to admit that it abounded in poetical beauties of the highest order.

This was essentially the position of most of the Victorian critics of Shelley. Dowden, because of a tolerant nature, and because he lived in a fairly tolerant age, merely deplored or extenuated what had earlier been denounced. Matthew Arnold, less able to extenuate, would have been glad to forget certain facts in the poet's life and to ignore certain ideas in the poems. Taking the critics mentioned as typical we find these attitudes: Shelley was a bad man and a bad poet; Shelley was a bad man but a good poet; Shelley did some things which are regrettable and which we might well forget, and he expresses some ill-considered ideas, but he is a great lyric poet.

Marking the hundredth anniversary of Shelley's birth came a small volume by Henry S. Salt called *Shel-*

*ley's Principles*, in which a vigorous defense is made of Shelley's radical doctrines, with an attempt to show that they were coming into use more every day. Mr. Salt denied that good poetry can be based upon evil ideas, and advanced the thesis that Shelley's ideas are good and that his art is good. Contrasting the most hostile and the most friendly critics we have these attitudes: Shelley as he is revealed in his poetry is immoral; Shelley as he is revealed in his poetry is moral. Still another attitude is taken by those who are irked by the consideration of the moral element in art: Shelley was unmoral; his poetry has no reference to either the moral or the immoral; he was devoid of conscience. That the poet really tried to achieve a non-moral position is evident from his letters, but that it was impossible for him to reach or to maintain such a position the first chapter in this study attempts to establish. Shelley was a born teacher, but the public rejected his teaching. He was also a born singer; he too had a talent which it was death to hide. Would the world listen more readily to his singing if he did not also try to teach? In this situation lies the explanation of much of Shelley's aesthetic theory, and of his life.

In addition to the place of didacticism and the treatment of evil in art, this essay tries to show what Shelley's attitude was toward nature. Shelley was not primarily a nature poet. He was rarely content to imitate mundane forms. As an idealist and as a creative artist he was interested in the creation of a world better than nature. As a moralist he was anxious to communicate his ideas that he might teach his fellows a better way of life; but when he felt himself rejected by mankind he

expressed his thoughts and emotions to ease the pain of his own heart.

In the last three chapters there is a consideration of what poetry is and how it achieves its effect; of Shelley's conception of beauty as the informing idea which gives harmony, law, and stability to the universe; and finally a consideration of the basis and validity of criticism.

## CONTENTS

I.	THE POET AS TEACHER . . . . .	
	<p>I. Definition of "moral," and "moralistic" or "didactic." Shelley essentially moralistic. II. Early preoccupation with the problem of truth and the teaching of moral doctrine. III. Shelley's view of himself as a dedicated spirit. IV. Didacticism of <i>Queen Mab</i>. His earlier puritanical attitude toward ornament. V. Artistic compensations which relieve the didacticism. Three factors which, so far as his theory was concerned, tended to lessen the didactic element: (1) lack of success with the public; (2) an enlarged view of the nature and power of poetry; (3) the writing of drama. VI. The discrepancy between theory and practice; the relation of his aesthetic and metaphysic.</p>	
II.	EVIL AND THE POET . . . . .	36
	<p>I. The metaphysical and psychological nature of evil. II. Truth and beauty one, and more powerful than error and ugliness. III. Creation necessarily imperfect; beauty needs to be veiled. IV. Beauty alone can make the world intelligible, but all things have potential beauty. V. Evil in art excused by "sympathetic curiosity," by the admiration for heroism, by the "tragic flaw." VI. The comic. VII. The pathetic. Error due to fate. VIII. The utilization and sublimation of evil by beauty as harmony or rhythm or form.</p>	
III.	NATURE AND THE IDEAL WORLD OF THE POET . . .	57
	<p>I. Contrasting views of Shelley as a nature-poet. II. What "nature" has meant in past times, and the various meanings which it had for Shelley. III. Shelley's first</p>	



observations of external nature and man. *Mab* and other early poems a confusion of sentimental naturalism, necessitarianism, and a dawning idealism. IV. The effect of external nature upon the poet. V. Shelley's maturer power of observation. VI. The scientific element in Shelley's view of nature. VII. But nature is the veil which hides reality. The myths. VIII. The creative power of mind is more important in poetry than sense impression. IX. Skepticism and subjectivity; thought is the great reality. X. Influence of early necessitarianism acts as check upon Shelley's transcendentalism. XI. *Prometheus* as a subjective drama. XII. Time and place in Shelley's poetic world. XIII. The fantastic creations of mind.

- IV. ART AS IMITATION AND ART AS CREATION . . . . . 97
- I. The theories of art: imitation, creation, communication, expression. II. The mind creates by combining the materials of sense. III. The artist is a product of the age which he helps to create. The factors of artistic form, moral tone, and discipline which the age gives the artist. IV. The imaginative mirror distorts facts to achieve truth. V. Shelley withdraws from the mundane world and abandons the communication theory. VI. Shelley's mysticism; inspiration and creation. VII. Comparative value of spontaneity and of revision. Comments on Shelley as an artist.
- V. POETRY . . . . . 123
- I. Poetry as imitation of the ideal. II. The formalistic element in poetry. III. Measured and unmeasured language. IV. How poetry achieves its effect. V. The original element in poetry; translation. VI. The vital character of poetic language. VII. System and mannerism in language. Shelley's language.
- VI. BEAUTY: ITS MEANING AND POWER . . . . . 149
- I. Shelley's conception of beauty is composite. II. The possibility of beauty in the ugly; the wild aspects of

# CONTENTS

xv

nature. Beauty as plenty. III. Beauty as form, objective or subjective, or the apperception of form. IV. Shelley's approach to the Platonic idea of beauty. V. The feminine symbols for the idea beauty. VI. Beauty as love. VII. The formative power of beauty. VIII. Shelley's religious veneration for beauty. IX. No distinction between the beautiful and the sublime.

## VII. THE POET AS CRITIC . . . . . 183

I. The critic as a bankrupt creative artist; the man of talent trying to dictate to the man of genius. II. The separation of the man and the poet; bridging the gap. III. Objective standards arose out of his idealism, sentimentalism, naturalism. The principles derived from the ideal instead of empirical. IV. Shelley's critical statements are based upon notions of form, upon physical and metaphysical laws, upon sociological theory, upon the hedonistic test of pleasure. Poetry must be new, relative to the age, and beautiful. Much of Shelley's criticism, like his poetry, has a moralistic basis.

## INDEX . . . . . 203



## CHAPTER I

### THE POET AS TEACHER

#### I

Many critics have thought Shelley deficient in ethical sense. "Among the English poets of all sorts, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth serve to exemplify the presence of this quality [ethos]," says a contemporary scholar; "it is relatively lacking in Dryden, Shelley, and Byron." Bagehot thought that Shelley's moral sense was "defective"; Lamb was persuaded that Shelley's "theories and nostrums" were full of "miching malice." The *London Literary Gazette* thought his work "the production of a fiend, and calculated for the entertainment of devils in hell"; the *Quarterly* prophesied that the waters of oblivion would close over this blasphemous writer's head.

But while the character of Shelley's ethical sense may still be a matter of dispute, there can be no doubt that he was throughout his life devotedly attached to a distinctive body of doctrines concerning politics, property, education, love, marriage, religion, and metaphysics. Neither can there be any doubt that he used his poetry to disseminate these doctrines. Even *Blackwood's*<sup>1</sup> referred to him as a moralist, though "an obscure and cheerless one." The most lifeless parts of his work, says this periodical, are those in which the poet

<sup>1</sup> June, 1819

obtrudes his contemptible dogmas upon the reader. The critics who have accepted at its face value Shelley's statement that didactic poetry was his "abhorrence," have been very easily misled. It shall be the purpose of this chapter to point out the first appearance of Shelley's moralistic tendencies and his own clear statement of his didactic aim; then through his major works to trace the gradual decline of his didacticism, and to ascertain the causes for the adoption of a more free and a more aesthetic attitude. Finally, we shall observe discrepancies between theory and practice.

Perhaps it is first necessary to define our terms. A recent definition of poetry as "the expression of imaginative experience, valued simply as such and significant simply as such,"<sup>2</sup> would have been unintelligible to Shelley in his earlier years. For to Shelley, imaginative experience had a practical value. Arnold's belief that "poetry is at bottom a criticism of life" would have been more compatible. Shelley would have agreed with Arnold, too, that any ideas are "moral" which are concerned with the question of how to live. In the *Defense of Poetry* he tells us that the imagination is the chief instrument of moral good—the constructive faculty of the mind—and that poetry is the expression of the imagination. To Shelley there was a direct connection between "life" and imagination on the one hand, and imagination and the world of ideal truth on the other. The imagination was the instrument by which the mundane was put in accord with the infinite. Hence the highest

<sup>2</sup> Abercrombie, *The Theory of Poetry*, p.161

poetry, whose concern is with the ideal, must have a direct bearing upon everyday existence—must be moral.

But to say that some of Shelley's poetry is "moralistic" or "didactic" does not mean that it is merely "moral." It means that his poetry has a quality and a purpose which is much more particular, narrow, and immediate. Moralistic and didactic poetry is not content with giving pleasure, expanding the mind, and broadening the sympathies through the presentation of actions and passions. It aims at particular instruction: either the establishing of some doctrine or theory, or system, or the destruction of a system or convention now in force; it aims to secure conversion to a certain belief which may lead to a definite action. In the broad sense all of Shelley's poetry is "moral" in so far as it is concerned with "the eternal ideas which lie behind the many-coloured, ever-shifting veil that we call reality or life." And not a little of it is didactic.

Shelley saw and wrote about society as made up of two classes: oppressed and oppressors; his sympathy for the unfortunate was easily aroused, and his hatred for the tyrant class flamed up as easily. The physical, mental, and moral betterment of mankind, especially during his residence in England, occupied much of his time, and to it he devoted what in his circumstances amounted to a great deal of money; his zeal for the cause of the unfortunate class and his opposition to the master class furnished motifs for much of his poetical work. The desire to enlighten the downtrodden appears at least in the background of all of his poems, excepting only the love songs and a few other short lyrics. Shelley

the reformer appears even in the poignant lyric cry of the *Ode to the West Wind*, though no specific doctrine appears there; but his passionate prayer is wrung from him by his intense desire to awaken the earth from its slavery:

Be thou, Spirit fierce,  
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!  
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy!

In the *Revolt of Islam* he tells us, speaking through Laon, that it was the desire to awaken the sympathy of the multitude with his hopes for their liberation which caused him to put those hopes into language:

These hopes found words through which my spirit sought  
To weave a bondage of such sympathy,  
As might create some response to the thought  
Which ruled me now—and as the vapours lie  
Bright in the outspread morning's radiancy,  
So were these thoughts invested with the light  
Of language

—II, xvi.

And again Laon says his song:

Peopled with thoughts the boundless universe,  
A mighty congregation, which were strong  
Whene'er they trod the darkness to disperse  
The cloud of that unutterable curse

Which clings upon mankind —all things became  
Slaves to my holy and heroic verse,  
Earth, sea and sky, the planets, life and fame  
And fate, or whate'er else binds the world's wondrous frame

—II, xxx.

If we can judge from statements made by Shelley himself both early and late in life, his principal interest was hardly that of the artist at all, but that of the moral philosopher. But as a moral philosopher his ideal was perfection, which, as to Plato, was also beauty. Beauty as perfection, then, becomes at once the aim and end of all effort, and he who shows the way to perfection is at once artist and reformer. We shall see that Shelley's first notion was to point out the road to perfection by means of the reason. In this he was a follower of Godwin and the French rationalists. Later he abandoned this method except for occasional outcroppings such as we find in the *Mask of Anarchy*, putting more stress upon the emotional element, especially that of pleasure. As the years passed he became less the rationalist and reformer, so far as his principal poems and his aesthetic theory are concerned, and more the hedonist and mystic. As his knowledge of the world increased he came to see, although deficient in true historical sense, that all systems of morals are transitory and local, and that only general moral truths are fit subjects for poetry, which must be universal and permanent in nature. This was the position which he had reached when he wrote the *Defense of Poetry*, although even there a certain moralistic trend is apparent.



## II

Shelley's zeal for reforming the world was of early origin: "Oh my dearest friend," he wrote to Elizabeth Hitchener in January, 1812, "when I think of the uncertainty and transitoriness of human life and its occupations, when I consider its fleeting prospects and its fluctuating principles, how desirous am I to crowd into its sphere as much usefulness as possible. We have but a certain time allotted to us in which to do its business; how much does it become us to improve and multiply this time; and to regard every hour neglected, mispent, or unimproved, as so much lost to the cause of virtue, liberty, and happiness." In the same year he wrote to Godwin that "The science of things is superior to the science of words." During his Eton and Oxford days his interest in the science of things was dominant and led him into unguided and often disastrous experimentation, into extensive but unsystematic reading in the physical sciences, and into the mechanistic schemes of the French materialists. But that he had an early interest in man, his social problems, and his fate in the hereafter is also evident from such early poems as *A Dialogue* (1809). Death to the tired mortal offers a "calm habitation":

Where no longer the scorpions of Perfidy goad,  
Where the phantoms of Prejudice vanish away,  
And Bigotry's bloodhounds lose scent of the prey  
Yet tell me, dark Death, when thine empire is o'er,  
What awaits on Futurity's mist-covered shore?

In *The Solitary* (1810) the eighteen-year-old poet develops the theme, which later forms a minor note in

*Alastor*, that isolation from one's fellows is an evil thing because it indicates a lack of love among men. To love no one is to be accursed, worse than the lone pariah of the desert, who bears a "killing, withering weight." His hatred of war, and the danger to the people in a system of government wherein "one frail mortal's mandate governs all," are expressed in the poem *War*, the first piece in *The Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson*, printed at Oxford in November, 1810. The need of reform he thought imperative, for conditions could never be improved

whilst some King, in cold ambition's dreams,  
Plans for the field of death his plodding schemes

Shelley's republicanism, descended from the French Revolution, inspired him with great zeal, but his first teachings are, like the parent from which his ideas sprang, largely destructive

Love of liberty was an early passion. "The Irishman's Song" in the *Victor and Cazire* volume is elevated above the other poems in the book because of the genuine passion which is there expressed. Freedom in religious thinking, also a reflection of the French Revolution, attracted Shelley while he was very young, and led to an epistolary war with ministers and other conservative gentlemen, personally unknown to Shelley. In 1810 "prelate-baiting" seems to have been a favorite amusement, only marred by the fact that the "bigots" to whom he addressed controversial letters sometimes refused to argue; for, as he explained to Hogg, "it de-

stroys the very nature of the thing to argue; it is contrary to *faith*.<sup>19</sup>

In the winter of 1810-11 Shelley's freethinking in politics and religion took on a deeper meaning, and his zeal for reform acquired a greater intensity. Previously he had been stimulated by the sufferings of others; aside from schoolboy persecutions, his own life had been free. But his proselyting of his sisters, and of his cousin, Harriet Grove, to whom he was engaged, now brought him into a conflict with his father, which led to great pecuniary hardship and into a quarrel with the Groves which resulted in the breaking-off of the engagement. The young reformer refused to give up his principles or to keep silent about them, and the cautious conservatism of his family and of the Groves only resulted in firing him with an intense hatred for intolerance. On January 3, 1811, he wrote the following violent dedication to Hogg:

Here I swear that never will I forgive intolerance! It is the only point on which I allow myself to encourage revenge; every moment shall be devoted to my object, which I can spare; and let me hope that it will not be a blow which spends itself and leaves the wretch at rest, but lasting, long revenge! I am convinced too, that it [intolerance] is the greatest disservice to society—that it encourages prejudices which strike at the root of the dearest and tenderest of its ties. Oh! how I wish I were the avenger!—that it were mine to crush the demon: to hurl him to his native hell, never to rise again and thus to establish for ever perfect and universal toleration *I expect to gratify some of this insatiable feeling in poetry.*

<sup>19</sup> December 20, 1810.

<sup>20</sup> Italics mine

That was what he was doing in *Queen Mab*, in which we find that the didactic purpose largely overshadows the aesthetic. The fiery speeches against the "prolific fiend," religion; against that "prototype of human misrule," God; against war, "the trade of blood"; against kings, tyrants, hypocrisy, intolerance, and all things that were hateful to Shelley, are, to be sure, put into the mouth of the Fairy Mab, but there can be no doubt as to who is really speaking.

Kings, priests, and statesmen, blast the human flower  
Even in its tender bud,

says the ardent reformer through the thin device of the Fairy Mab (IV, 104-5). Religion, she says, has peopled "earth with demons, Hell with men, and Heaven with slaves!" (VI, 70-71) Like a pulpiteer she exhorts men to a life of resolute good, of

Unalterable will, quenchless desire  
Of universal happiness,

—V, 226-27

then selfishness will have felt its death-blow, and a brighter morn will await mankind. For when he wrote *Queen Mab*, Shelley was confident that the eternal world

Contains at once the evil and the cure  
Some eminent in virtue shall start up,  
Even in the perversest time.  
The truths of their pure lips, that never die,  
Shall bind the scorpion falsehood with a wreath  
Of ever-living flame,  
Until the monster sting itself to death.

—VI, 32-38.

These eminent in virtue, guided by infallible reason, will achieve the release of the downtrodden from political, religious, and domestic tyranny, and secure them peace and happiness by enlightening their darkened minds.

And when

Reason's voice,  
Loud as the voice of Nature, shall have waked  
The nations; and mankind perceive that vice  
Is discord, war, and misery; that virtue  
Is peace, and happiness and harmony;  
When man's maturer nature shall disdain  
The playthings of its childhood;—kingly glare  
Will lose its power to dazzle; its authority  
Will silently pass by; the gorgeous throne  
Shall stand unnoticed in the regal hall,  
Fast falling to decay; whilst falsehood's trade  
Shall be as hateful and unprofitable  
As that of truth is now

—III, 127-38.

A connection between the mechanistic schemes of Holbach and the materialists, and the life of reason had been made by Godwin<sup>5</sup> when Shelley was still in his cradle, and Shelley in his first long poem celebrates the perfectly working universe where every part "Is fixed and indispensable."<sup>6</sup> This universal machine was slowly grinding toward perfection (although, except for man, it was already perfect). But the enthusiasm for a fixed and invincible necessity in the physical world Shelley did not get from Godwin. That philosopher applied the

<sup>5</sup> *Political Justice*, 1793.

<sup>6</sup> *Queen Mab*, II, 241.

law of necessity (which to him merely meant a causal relation) only to the mental processes. He denied that the physical factors of environment could determine conduct, for to admit that would be to admit that reason was impotent. Shelley, in *Queen Mab*, celebrates both the doctrine of the perfectly mechanized physical universe and the "all-subduing will"<sup>7</sup> of man. He makes no attempt to bridge the hiatus between these two theories. But while the metaphysics of *Queen Mab* is a *pot-pourri* of materialism, Berkeleyan idealism,<sup>8</sup> necessitarianism, and a transcendental belief in man's power to shape his world, there can be no mistake as to the preponderance of the didactic element; that Shelley's aim was to teach and to uplift, rather than to delight.

## III

That Shelley, like many other poets, regarded himself as a dedicated spirit, one of those chosen to disseminate the truth which is to free mankind, is apparent from several passages in his works. In 1811, after the rupture with Hogg, he wrote to Elizabeth Hitchener that he "*might* have slept in peace" (i.e., committed suicide), had he not felt that he must live for "an end, an aim, sanctified, hallowed." What this end is, and what is its direct cause, we find very well stated in the Dedication to *The Revolt of Islam*:

## III

Thoughts of great deeds were mine, dear Friend, when first  
The clouds that wrap this world from youth did pass.

<sup>7</sup> *Queen Mab*, V, 133.

<sup>8</sup> "Soul is the only element," *ibid*, IV, 140.

I do remember well the hour which burst  
 My spirit's sleep. a fresh May-dawn it was,  
 When I walked forth upon the glittering grass,  
 And wept, I know not why; until there rose  
 From the near schoolroom voices, that, alas!  
 Were but one echo from a world of woes—  
 The harsh and grating strife of tyrants and of foes.

## IV

And then I clasped my hands and looked around—  
 But none was near to mock my streaming eyes,  
 Which poured their warm drops on the sunny ground—  
 So, without shame, I spake:— 'I will be wise,  
 And just, and free, and mild, if in me lies  
 Such power, for I grow weary to behold  
 The selfish and the strong still tyrannise  
 Without reproach or check.' I then controlled  
 My tears, my heart grew calm, and I was meek and bold.

## V

And from that hour did I with earnest thought  
 Heap knowledge from forbidden mines of lore,  
 Yet nothing that my tyrants knew or taught  
 I cared to learn, but from that secret store  
 Wrought linked armour for my soul, before  
 I might walk forth to war among mankind; . . . .

and in the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* he vows to dedicate his powers to the "Awful Loveliness," not merely because of his love of beauty, but because he hopes beauty will free the dark world from its slavery:

I vowed that I would dedicate my powers  
 To thee and thine—have I not kept the vow?  
 With beating heart and streaming eyes, even now  
 I call thy phantoms of a thousand hours  
 Each from his voiceless grave: they have in visioned bowers

Of studious zeal or love's delight,  
 Outwatched with me the envious night—  
 They know that never joy illumed my brow  
 Unlinked with hope that thou would'st free  
 This world from its dark slavery,  
 That thou—O awful Loveliness,  
 Would's't give whate'er these words cannot express

## IV

In both *Queen Mab* and the *Revolt of Islam*, we have passages which, though not devoid of poetic beauty, are mere sermons to the reader. Such is much of the long speech of the Hermit to Laon in Canto IV, and nearly all of the speech of Cythna to the sailors in Canto VIII.<sup>9</sup> In the Preface to this revolutionary poem Shelley says:

I have sought to enlist the harmony of metrical language, the ethereal combinations of the fancy; the rapid and subtle transitions of human passions, all those elements which essentially compose a Poem, in the cause of a liberal and comprehensive morality; and in the view of kindling within the bosoms of my readers a virtuous enthusiasm for those doctrines of liberty and justice, that faith and hope in something good, which neither violence nor misrepresentation nor prejudice can ever totally extinguish among mankind.

This was Shelley at the age of twenty-five; at nineteen and twenty he was severely puritanical. He is not very enthusiastic about Walter Scott, he writes in June, 1811, because of Scott's aristocratic<sup>1</sup> tone; Shelley's

<sup>9</sup> The didactic passages are so numerous and apparent it is hardly necessary to list them. For those less familiar with the *Revolt of Islam* attention may be called to the conclusion "list and learn," Canto I, lviii; II, xii, xiii, xvi, xxx; III, viii; IV, ix, xxiv; Laone's Song, Canto V; XI, Laon's speech before the Senate.



opinion is that "all poetical beauty ought to be subordinate to the inculcated moral . . . that metaphysical language ought to be a pleasing vehicle for useful and momentous instruction."<sup>10</sup> About the same time he denounces the theaters because, instead of being schools of morality, they have become places for the "inculcation of abandonment of every moral principle," and the depravities which they impart are sanctioned by the haughty aristocrat and the commercial monopolist alike.<sup>11</sup> The Gothic cathedrals he condemns on the ground that the vast amount of time consumed in the erection of these "gigantic piles of superstition" might have supplied leisure for the cultivation of mind, and hence every edifice of the sort represents a retardation of the race. So with every useless ornament used in architecture; even the dirtiest cottage gives evidence of instances where ornament has taken what should have been devoted to cleanliness or mental culture. But it should be noted—and the distinction is important—that he associates virtue with joy, and not with the long-faced gloom of the puritans. In a note to *Queen Mab* he says that happiness is the sole end of the science of ethics, as of all other sciences. This hedonistic tenet was not expressed as a passing fancy. "Pleasure or good," he says in the *Defense*, "in a general sense, is that which the consciousness of a sensitive and intelligent being seeks, and in which, when found, it acquiesces."

<sup>10</sup> To Elizabeth Hitchener, June 6, 1811

<sup>11</sup> *Vide* also Peacock's "Memoir," *Fraser's Magazine* (June, 1858), p. 638.

## V

The deadening effect of the didactic elements in Shelley's earlier poems was mitigated by several factors which show that the moralist was also a poet. The elevation above the conceptions of the vulgar, of which he speaks, at once placed his teachings on a high imaginative plane; the immensity of his settings and the superhuman character of the events lend something which approaches the universality and timelessness of true poetry. In *Queen Mab*, in order to avoid the extreme of didacticism, he supplements the poetry with notes which explain his teachings in detail. Writing to Hookham (January 16, 1813), he says, "The notes to *Queen Mab* will be long and philosophical; I expect to take that opportunity which I judge to be a safe one, of propagating my principles, which I decline to do syllogistically in the poem. A poem very didactic, is, I think, very stupid." And in the Preface to the *Revolt of Islam* he says that he has made no attempt to recommend his teachings by *methodical or systematic argument*. Instead he has sought, through appealing to the emotions and awakening the feelings, to incite in the reader those inquiries which have led to his own moral and political creed. He has sought to make the poem less didactic by putting it in the form of romantic narrative, and by this means to arouse public hope, to awaken the nation from its slavery and degradation, to dethrone its oppressors, and to unveil its religious frauds.

Three factors helped to draw the poet away from the narrowly didactic point of view. A first very powerful factor in inducing this change was the hostility, misun-

derstanding, or complete indifference of the public toward his efforts. His works were violently attacked by the critics, who abused him as a monster of iniquity and crime. The mass of mankind whom he wished to reach and to elevate did not read him, and the powerful factions which he wished to overthrow were not only invulnerable to his artillery, but won over many who had formerly been radicals and reformers—among them Southey and Wordsworth. Leigh Hunt was one of the few critics to give him any measure of approbation. The knowledge that he was ineffective as a moral teacher of the multitude began to dawn upon him as early as 1812. On going to Ireland in that year to help bring about Catholic emancipation, he had had high hopes; but before many weeks had passed he was forced to admit that even his prose pamphleteering accomplished nothing. To Godwin, who had reproved him for his eagerness to become a teacher while he was yet a learner, he acknowledged that his attempt had been an error. "I submit," he writes, March 18 1812, "I shall address myself no more to the illiterate. I will look to events in which it will be impossible that I can share, and make myself the cause of an effect which will take place ages after I have mouldered in the dust; I need not observe that this resolve requires Stoicism."

His despondency grew when he slowly became aware that he was failing even with the more enlightened, and the knowledge of failure sapped his confidence. To Hunt (December 8, 1816) he wrote, "I am undeceived in the belief that I have powers deeply to interest, or substantially to improve mankind." He intimates that had he

known beforehand to what solitude of the heart his attempts would lead, he thought it likely that he should have shrunk from persisting in his task of opposing himself to what he deemed misery and vice. Shelley's retirement into himself as a result of public neglect and repeated failure to find sympathy for his views is well illustrated in the following lines from Lionel's song in *Rosalind and Helen*:

I wake to weep,  
And sit through the long day gnawing the core  
Of my bitter heart, and, like a miser, keep,  
Since none in what I feel take pain or pleasure,  
To my own soul its self-consuming treasure

—775-79

Mrs Shelley says in her note to the *Poems of 1817* that "His life was now spent more in thought than in action—he had lost the eager spirit which believed it could achieve what it projected for the benefit of Mankind." His youthful faith in his power of "operating an immediate change in the minds of men" had faded.

"The reception the public have given me might go far enough to damp any man's enthusiasm," he wrote to Peacock (November, 1820). "I have no confidence," he wrote to Clare Clairmont (December 11, 1821), "and to write in solitude or put forth thoughts without sympathy is unprofitable vanity."

But we must not assume that Shelley lost his interest in moral uplift, or that he modified very materially his radical views. For instance, his attitude toward Christianity as practiced by his contemporaries was as hostile in 1822 as it had been ten years earlier. On April 11 of

the last year of his life he learned that Moore had warned Byron against him, believing that he could perceive Shelley's influence in Byron's *Cain*. "Pray assure him [Moore]," Shelley wrote to Horace Smith, "that I have not the smallest influence over Lord Byron, in this particular, and if I had, I certainly should employ it to eradicate from his great mind the delusions of Christianity, which, in spite of his reason, seem perpetually to recur, and to lay in ambush for his hours of sickness and distress. . . . I differ with Moore in thinking Christianity useful to the world; no man of sense can think it true. . . . I agree with him that the doctrines of the French, and material philosophy,<sup>12</sup> are as false as they are pernicious; but still they are better than Christianity. . . ."

Mary Shelley, in her note to the *Poems of 1821*, tells us that Shelley did not intend to contribute any of his own work to the *Liberal*, the magazine which Byron, Hunt, and he were going to edit in Italy, because he did not want to use his friends' names to gain readers for his own work. As for his opinions, "carried even to their utmost extent, he wished to live and die" by them, because he firmly believed that they were not only true, "but such as alone would conduce to the moral improvement and happiness of mankind." In May, 1820, he wrote to

<sup>12</sup> A reference to the necessitarian doctrines which in *Qu'en Mab* he was doing his utmost to disseminate and teach. When he wrote that poem his favorite authors were Godwin, Holbach, Helvetius. *Le Systeme de la Nature* pleased him so much that he set out to translate it. But in his last years he says that his early teachers had a pernicious influence upon him. For his mature opinion of Christ, see the Notes to *Hellas*, Nos. 2 and 8.

Hunt: "The system of society as it exists at present must be overthrown from the foundations with all its superstructure of maxims and forms before we shall find anything but disappointment in our intercourse with any but a few select spirits. This remedy does not seem to be one of the easiest, but the generous few are not less bold to tend with all their efforts toward it."

We may conclude that although his interest in social questions continued, he practically abandoned the hope of securing any immediate or tangible reforms by means of poetry. In 1819 he wrote to Peacock (January 26):

I consider poetry very subordinate to moral and political science, and if I were well, certainly I would aspire to the latter; for I can conceive a great work, embodying the discoveries of all ages, and harmonizing the contending creeds by which mankind have been ruled. Far from me is such an attempt, and I shall be content, by exercising my fancy, to amuse myself, and perhaps some others, and cast what weight I can into the scale of that balance, which the Giant of Arthegall holds.

He had so often miscalculated the effects of his poems upon the public that his early enthusiasm and confidence had been almost destroyed. As persecution had driven him into exile, so the abuse of the critics and the neglect of the reading public forced him to retire more and more into himself. In his *Defense* he is surely describing his own isolated position when he says that "A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds."

The second cause for the diminution of the didactic element in Shelley's long poems was the change in his

attitude toward poetry itself, and its effect upon the moral nature of man. His earlier poems, *Mab* especially, attack vigorously whatever is thought injurious to social progress, heaping invective upon everything considered evil—whenever possible pointing out the remedy. We have already seen that in 1811 he disapproved of the theater because it was not used for moral propaganda, and of church architecture because of its useless ornamentation. He also disliked comedy because it held up to ridicule poor wretches who were deserving only of pity. But sometime before 1819 he came to believe that poetry was much wider in its scope than he had heretofore believed, and that it secured its effect in a way different from that which he had at first supposed; a way which was beginning to dawn upon him when he wrote the *Revolt of Islam*.<sup>13</sup>

In the *Defense* he defines poetry as "the expression of the imagination," and distinguishes imagination from the reason by declaring the former to be synthetic in its nature, while reason is analytic. Imagination is an original creative principle within man which harmonizes all materials of sense in accord with the individual in question, and also with the eternal, the infinite, and the one, in so far as the person is a poet. A very important attribute of poetry is that it is always attended with pleasure; it seeks to prolong the pleasures of life just as the child attempts to prolong by its voice and gestures the

<sup>13</sup> "It is the business of the poet to communicate to others the pleasure and the enthusiasm arising out of those images and feelings in the vivid presence of which within his own mind consists at once his inspiration and reward" (Preface).

consciousness of whatever has given it pleasure. In all classes of representation there is a certain order or rhythm or form from which the hearer or spectator receives more pleasure than from any other, and those who are able to detect the rhythms which give most delight are poets in the most universal sense of the word. The subject matter of poetry is not limited by any moralistic consideration, for it contains within itself an infallible connection with the infinite. Between the world of ideal truth and the motives and actions<sup>s</sup> which have place in the possible varieties of human nature there is a relationship which the imagination is able to perceive. "A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth."

Poetry achieves its effect by expanding the reader's mind and by enlarging his sympathies; its excellence works in a manner impossible to apprehend, for the poet as a creator participates in the unchangeable forms which exist in the mind of the Creator of the Universe. Poetry not only awakens and enlarges the mind of the reader, but it "lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world," and improves man, not by propounding moral doctrines, but by awakening admiration for the beautiful and the true. It has not been for lack of admirable doctrines that men have hated, despised, censured, and subjugated one another; there have always been plenty of estimable doctrines. But beauty can accomplish its ends because it has power to reproduce itself in the minds of those who behold it. It can vanquish the ugly and attract to its own nature all our other thoughts. One has only to see beauty to desire it,



and once the love of beauty is aroused, the question of morality is solved. Thus art, being inevitably moral in its effect, has no need of being didactic.

Beauty inspires love in the beholder, and love is the great secret of morals. By love he means "a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own." Imagination, then, becomes the instrument of moral good; that one is most capable of good who can imagine most intensely, can put himself in the place of another, or of many others. Poetry, as an expression of imagination, can "strengthen the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb."

In his *Defense*, Shelley practically reverses his early position in regard to the function of poetry and the other arts. He does not now say that "all poetical beauty ought to be subordinate to the inculcated moral," or that "metaphorical language ought to be a pleasing vehicle for useful and momentous instruction." Instead he speaks scornfully of the tragedy of decadent periods which becomes "a weak attempt to teach certain doctrines, which the writer considers moral truths; and which are usually no more than specious flatteries of some gross vice or weakness, with which the author, in common with his auditors, are infected. . . . To such purposes poetry cannot be made subservient. Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it."

This maturer view of poetry as the expression of the imagination was moral in the broad sense of that term;

but it was not didactic because it contained no reasoned ethical systems or precepts. It was moral because the creative faculty of the poet—the imagination—was able to penetrate the veil of appearances and to represent with some approximation to exactness the truth which lies behind the vain shows of this world. Now Shelley is of the opinion that the poet “would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time,” and which would not therefore have the qualities of universality and eternity which poetry ought to have. Spenser, Tasso, and other poets who have affected a direct moral (i.e., didactic) aim, have marred their poetry, he says, “in exact proportion to the degree in which they compel us to advert to this purpose.” Milton he praises for what he thinks is “a bold neglect of a direct moral purpose.”

The third cause for the abandonment of the obviously didactic attitude was the writing of drama, particularly *The Cenci*. Shelley had been, up to this time, almost entirely a lyrical poet. *Prometheus Unbound*, which marks an important step in the progress which we are tracing, he calls a lyrical drama. To a very large extent his poetry before 1819 was autobiographical—a continuous revelation of the poet's life, his character, philosophical and moral views, and his feelings under all sorts of conditions. The fact that Shelley introduces himself everywhere, even in the poem in which he mourns for the death of Keats, has been used as evidence that he was wholly wrapped up in self, and devoid of sympathy. That he was engrossed in self is undeniable. He was aware of the fact, lamenting in a letter to

Hogg (January 12, 1811) his "egotizing variability." Eight years later (August 15, 1819) he writes to Hunt: "So much for self—*self*, that burr that will stick to one. I can't get it off yet." But certainly he was then closer to it than he had ever been. We know that in the earlier poems the principal character is an embodiment of Shelley himself; thus, the author is speaking through Laon, and through Prometheus; the Poet in *Alastor*, Athenase, and "the one frail form" in *Adonais*, Julian, and probably the Madman in that poem, are self-portraits;<sup>14</sup> even *Rosalind and Helen* is thinly disguised autobiography. So long as the poet is the chief, or an important, figure in the poem, he is apt to retain to a large extent the character of the preacher or the orator. But when Shelley was faced with the problem of making a drama out of historical material, he was forced to subdue self; he was compelled to project himself imaginatively into all of the characters, good and bad, in turn. The result is that in the developing of a variety of personalities, the individuality of the poet is so split and divided that, aside from the general characteristics of the poem as a whole, the author is not to be found. Naturally we suppose that Shelley's sympathies are with Beatrice; but we can no more say that Beatrice represents Shelley than we can say that Desdemona or Cordelia represents Shakespeare. There can be no doubt that the process of creating these many characters taught Shelley to put

<sup>14</sup> "Later on in life Shelley outgrew this preoccupation with his idealized self and directed his genius to more objective themes. Yet the autobiographic tendency, as befitted a poet of the highest lyric type, remained to the end a powerful characteristic" (Symonds, "E.M.L. Series," *Shelley*, p. 98.)

himself in the place of others, and to sympathize with many others; and that he here acquired the broad sympathy and toleration which made him turn against his early narrowly moralistic attitude.

In the dedicatory letter to Hunt (May 29, 1819) Shelley tells us that the writings which he has so far published have been little else than visions which impersonate his own apprehensions of the beautiful and the just; they are, he says, "dreams of what ought to be, or may be. But the drama which I now lay before you is a sad reality." Here he has attempted to take material well known in Italy and to make it into a work of art. The material is "that which has been," which he is content to paint "with such colours as my own heart furnishes." This personal element which his heart furnishes, is, of course, the imaginative and emotional element which gives life to any work of art; for, as he explains elsewhere, facts are of the least importance in poetry.

In writing about *The Cenci* to Peacock (July, 1819) he says, "It is written without any of the peculiar feelings and opinions which characterize my other compositions; I have attended simply to the impartial development of such characters as it is probable the persons represented really were. . . ." And reverting to the letter to Hunt previously cited, we find a statement even more significant to our theme: "*I lay aside the presumptuous attitude of an instructor,*"<sup>18</sup> he says. Writing again to Hunt in September, he asserts that *The Cenci* "is nothing which, by any courtesy of language,

<sup>18</sup> Dedication, to Leigh Hunt. Italics are mine.

can be termed either moral or immoral " The criteria which he would now employ are: Does it represent truly human relationships? Is its reading or presentation attended by pleasure? If so, it is a genuine work of art which is outside of time and apart from any system of morals which may for the time be prevalent in Great Britain or elsewhere. "There must also be nothing attempted to make the exhibition subservient to what is vulgarly termed a moral purpose. The highest moral purpose aimed at in the highest species of drama, is the teaching of the human heart, through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself; in proportion to the possession of which knowledge, every human being is wise, just, sincere, tolerant, and kind. If dogmas can do more, it is well; but a drama is no fit place for the enforcement of them."<sup>16</sup>

In *The Cenci* he has tried to avoid the error of making the characters actuated by his own conceptions of right and wrong, truth and falsehood. Beatrice is actuated by revenge, according to Shelley's own statement in the Preface to the drama—which is a very pernicious sentiment, but this very human imperfection makes her, he says, a suitable character for tragedy, because it enables the audience, also imperfect, to sympathize with her situation. A second historical drama, *Charles the First*, he was unable to finish; but in this work he also tried to exclude his personal views. As he wrote to the Olliers (January 11, 1822), "it is not coloured by the party spirit of the author."

<sup>16</sup> Preface to *The Cenci*.

## VI

From the Preface to *The Cenci* and from the letters of that time, we are now able to formulate the following definition: Poetry is an unmoral, free emotional expression or presentation of the images and ideas which throng the mind of the poet. But fundamentally neither the absence of moral reference nor the apparently increased grasp on mundane reality which we see in this drama wholly accord with the poet's metaphysic. He was an idealist of the Platonic cast, and accordingly believed that poets as seers participated in the eternal, the infinite, the one. "Poets . . . were called in earlier epochs of the world, legislators and prophets," he says in the *Defense*. They are "the institutors of laws and the founders of civil society." The moral point of view is for such a one inescapable; for one of Shelley's ardent temperament the didactic is very apt to crop out. That Shelley did not maintain the free aesthetic attitude which has been set forth above becomes apparent upon examining his poems written subsequent to *The Cenci*.

When we review Shelley's longer works in their order of completion, *Queen Mab*, the *Revolt of Islam*, *Prometheus Unbound*, and *The Cenci*, we see a steady progress from the almost violently didactic to the fairly impersonal and almost purely aesthetic, which accords with the prose statements of his gradually developing theory of art. But a closer examination of the poems will reveal that while there is a genuine growth away from the didactic and toward the hedonistic, the change is not as complete as one at first thinks it, or, indeed, as complete

as Shelley himself seems to have thought it. The theme in every work is the same: the struggle against tyranny. *Mab* is the least artistic, for there a supernatural being appears to a mortal spirit and harangues against kingcraft, priestcraft, money-power, and war, and instructs the spirit how to achieve freedom. In the *Revolt of Islam* the didactic element is at least relieved by narrative, and there is some attempt at characterization. But no one considers the narrative interest to be the chief interest. A critic contemporary with the poet wrote: "It will be seen, indeed, that neither the main interest nor the main merit of the poet at all consists in the conception of his plot or in the arrangement of his incidents."<sup>17</sup>

*Prometheus Unbound* is so highly idealized and so remote from the conditions of life that the moral lesson is not essential to the enjoyment of the piece, and is, in fact, so well disguised that the critics have differed widely as to its interpretation.<sup>18</sup> In the Preface to *Prometheus*, he admits that he has "a passion for reforming the world," but adds that "it is a mistake to suppose that I dedicate my poetical compositions solely to the direct enforcement of reform, or that I consider them in any degree as containing a reasoned system on the theory of human life. Didactic poetry is my abhorrence; nothing can be equally well expressed in prose that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse." That he was becoming a conscious artist is apparent, but the fact remains

<sup>17</sup> *Blackwood's* (January, 1819), pp. 482-86.

<sup>18</sup> See White, "Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, or *Every Man His own Allegorist*," *PMLA*, XL, I, p. 172.

that he *had* "a passion for reforming the world,"<sup>19</sup> and although he lost faith in poetry as a vehicle for reform measures, that passion remained with him to the end. His objection to Clark's pirated edition of *Queen Mab* in 1821 was not merely on the ground that it was "perfectly worthless in point of view of literary composition," but that he, as "a devoted enemy to religious, political and domestic oppression," feared that it was "better fitted to injure than to serve the sacred cause of freedom."<sup>20</sup> With such evidence at hand it is impossible to agree with the critic who finds that Shelley was sickened of didactic poetry by writing *Rosalind and Helen*, and that later he "seldom wasted his powers upon it."<sup>21</sup>

*The Cenci*, while on the whole an objective drama, is not entirely so. The story seized upon Shelley's imagination, we may be sure, because of its theme: the struggle of the virtuous and helpless against the powerful and evil. Shelley utilized the source as completely as he did because it fitted so well into his life-long preoccupation with the contending forces of oppressed and oppressors, and he was able to write the drama with little effort and in short time because his whole life of thought had been preparation for that sort of task. His subconscious mind was so charged with this theme that the vivid Italian story at once struck fire and set in motion currents which

<sup>19</sup> "We catch, indeed, in these long speeches (*P U.*, Act III something of the didactic tone of *Queen Mab*, which falls coldly upon our ears filled with the pure passion of the lyrical music of the poem" (Todhunter, *Shelley: A Study*, p. 179). See also the *Earth's Song*, Act. IV, 370 ff.

<sup>20</sup> *To the Examiner*, June 22, 1821.

<sup>21</sup> Clutton-Brock, *Shelley, the Man and the Poet*, 2d ed., p. 170.



almost without conscious control produced the tragedy. Such departures from the source as he makes were largely prompted by the moral cast of his mind. His Beatrice, though he says she is not perfect, is very superior to the Beatrice of history, because with Shelley the struggle in life was perpetually between the forces of good and of evil. *Cenci* is all evil, and Beatrice and Lucretia represent the good. We may even doubt Shelley's statement that Beatrice was actuated by revenge. Rather she was vindicating God. Instead of perpetuating an act of human revenge, Beatrice looked upon herself as the direct instrument of Deity. Through her, the church having failed, God visited his wrath upon the wicked. Hence her denial of the murder and her assertion of innocence.<sup>22</sup>

Avowedly Shelley's purpose was to probe "the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart." But it is rather significant that this work, which is free from obvious moralism, was valued least by its author. Mrs. Shelley, in her note to the drama, probably gives us the reason. While Shelley had here demonstrated his *ability* to delineate human passions, she says that he preferred the fantastic creations of his fancy, "or the expression of those opinions and sentiments, with regard to human nature and its destiny, *a desire to diffuse which was the master passion of his soul.*"

We may well ask ourselves if Shelley's progress in the writing of drama was not checked by this very master-passion for diffusing his moral ideas; if *Charles the*

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed analysis, see Bates, *A Study of "The Cenci,"* Columbia University Press

*First* was not wrecked upon this rock? Medwin<sup>23</sup> seemed to understand Shelley's predicament, at least in part; for he intimates that Shelley was blocked by his aversion for the Puritans and by his inability to reconcile himself to the beheading of Charles. It seems plain that Shelley could make no headway because he lacked an objective; he had no moral purpose toward which to direct the scenes. This matter, unlike the Cenci story, would not fit into Shelley's ethical system. His republicanism was not strong enough to overcome his dislike of the Puritans. He could not yet treat his material in the objective manner demanded of the dramatist. He really had not gotten away from self yet; the burr still clung to him; the ethical philosopher was pretty rigidly limited to a single theme, and could utilize only such material as fitted into this conception of the world.

If we turn away from the longer poems to some of the shorter, we are met by more significant facts. To 1819, the year of *The Cenci*, belong these titles, which speak for themselves: *Lines Written during the Castle-rcagh Administration*; *Song for the Men of England*; *Similes for Two Political Characters of 1819*; *Fragment: To the People of England*; *Fragment: What Men Gain Fairly*; *A New National Anthem*; *Sonnet: England in 1819*; *An Ode, Written October, 1819, before the Spaniards Had Recovered Their Liberty*. These poems, we may assume from Mrs. Shelley's note, were to be part of an octavo on reform about which Shelley wrote to Ollier, December 15, 1819. "I am preparing an octavo on reform—a commonplace kind of book—which,

<sup>23</sup> Medwin, *Life of Shelley*, II, 163-65

now that I see the passion of party will postpone the great struggle till another year, I shall not trouble myself to finish for this season. I intend it to be an instructive and readable book, appealing from the passions to the reasons of men."

The *Ode to Liberty* (1820) is as didactic as a poem could well be, and contains all of Shelley's favorite doctrines. In addition to the familiar exhortation to man to break the bonds of tyranny, to expel kings and priests, and to reassert "his own high will," we find a doctrine which is further developed in *A Defense of Poetry*. Art, says Shelley, while it can never entirely pass away, is submerged in periods of tyranny, and only attains its proper perfection when liberty appears. Tyranny, he says in one of his sonnets, destroys not only happiness, but skill in both arms and the arts. Those subject to tyranny cannot command verse, for in those unhappy times

Art veils her glass, or from the pageant starts  
As to oblivion their blind millions fleet,  
Staining that Heaven with obscene imagery  
Of their own likeness. What are numbers knit  
By force or custom?

—Sonnet: *Political Greatness*.

According to a statement made by Medwin, Shelley believed that we could never rival the ancients in art until we matched them in civil and private virtue. Moreover, in the *Ode to Liberty*, as in the *Defense*, art has a utilitarian character. He calls art

an ardent intercessor  
Driving on fiery wings to Nature's throne,

demanding (and getting, we may suppose) of Nature, "dominion over all height and depth." Art we may here identify with imagination, as Shelley identifies poetry and imagination in the *Defense*. The stress which is laid on the usefulness of poetry in that essay one might think accidental, due to the necessity of answering Peacock's charge that anyone who now read poetry was wasting his time; that science had progressed so far that poetry had become merely a gewgaw for the grown babies of the age.<sup>21</sup> But we noted earlier that Shelley identified beauty and perfection. Imagination is the means for discovering beauty and perfection, and its expression is art. In a note to *Hellas*, which was written two years after the *Defense*, he says that "it is the province of the poet to attach himself to those ideas which exalt and ennoble humanity," and the poet, like everyone else, is impelled by an "inextinguishable thirst for immortality," or, we may say, a perfect state of being. It is not then accidental that all art has a moral, or even a useful basis, nor that its attainment or approximation should be attended by pleasure.

Shelley's metaphysic forms the background for his aesthetic. Or perhaps we might ask whether his ethical doctrines and his lasting interest in their propagation did not determine both his metaphysic and his aesthetic. However that may be, they complement each other, and, being such as they are, a deep moral cast in the work of one who holds these beliefs is inevitable. A strong didactic strain is apparent in Shelley's poetry whenever the

<sup>21</sup> Peacock, *The Four Ages of Poetry*

passion for reform became dominant. And such was often the case. Such events as the Manchester massacre and the revolutions in Southern Europe were enough to submerge for the time the artistic principles which he had formulated for himself, and to inject into his work much that was particular and local rather than universal and timeless.

Even when this was not the case he was frequently didactic. Apart from the poetic style of the following passage from the last work of the poet, anyone familiar with Shelley could identify the passage as his from the doctrines which he had made familiar almost a decade earlier: The lines are not put into the mouth of Rousseau or any other character, but come from the observer of the pageant himself—the poet. He recognizes in the throng

The anarch chiefs, whose force and murderous snares  
Had founded many a sceptre-bearing line,  
And spread the plague of gold and blood abroad  
And Gregory and John, and men divine,  
  
Who rose like shadows between man and God;  
Till that eclipse, still hanging over heaven,  
Was worshipped by the world o'er which they strode  
For the true sun it quenched. . . .

—285-92.

This is a homily in Shelley's characteristic manner; but it is also passionate, for, fortunately, Shelley could sing as well as preach.

Of course no one now considers Shelley's principles as "ludicrously wicked,"<sup>25</sup> and no one now thinks that he

<sup>25</sup> *Literary Gazette* (September 9, 1820), p. 580

consecrated his sin into a religion, proclaiming "the worship of uncleanness as the last and highest ethical development of 'pure' humanity."<sup>26</sup> Though some will agree with Hazlitt and Lamb that "nobody was ever better or wiser for reading Shelley,"<sup>27</sup> there can be no doubt that Shelley intended his poetry to serve in the cause of what seemed to him to be virtue. But there are still those who look upon him as defective in ethical sense, as unmoral, although not immoral. And, as has been said previously, there are statements in his letters (not to mention acts in his life) which support this view. Two excerpts from Shelley's letters will suffice. Writing of *Don Juan* (August 9, 1821) he said: "There is not a word which the most rigid asserter of the dignity of human nature would desire to be cancelled." Writing to Mrs. Gisborne (November 16, 1819) he said: "Incest is, like many other incorrect things, a very poetical circumstance." Only a very brief comment needs to be made on this matter, and the words are happily supplied by Shelley himself in a letter to Hunt: "I have confidence in my moral sense alone—but *that is a kind of originality.*"

<sup>26</sup> Kingsley, *Fraser's Magazine*, XLVIII, 570.

<sup>27</sup> Lamb, *Life and Letters*, edited by Talfourd, I, 239.

## CHAPTER II

### EVIL AND THE POET

#### I

In a note to *Hellas*, already cited, Shelley says that it is the province of the poet to attach himself to those ideas which exalt and ennoble humanity. This statement, made in the last work published in the author's lifetime, raises the question: Is the poet, or is any artist, limited in his choice of subject matter to that which is elevating; to that which is so much better than the run of humanity that it will serve as an inspiring example to all readers or beholders?

We are not here primarily concerned with Shelley's conception of evil and its origin, but a brief examination of his notion of the nature of evil will throw some light upon his attitude toward the treatment of evil in art. When he wrote *Queen Mab*, several incongruous philosophical theories, the results of wide and varied reading, filled his mind. Each of these has some bearing on his explanation of evil. Naturalism aided by sentimentalism supplied the ideas that nature and man are inherently good, and that evil is an accidental thing due to man's departure from the ways of nature; for example, in the matter of flesh-eating (*Mab*, VIII, 211-18). In a universe essentially filled with love and joy, man, though inherently good, through his own folly has become an outcast:

The universe,  
 In Nature's silent eloquence, declares  
 That all fulfil the works of love and joy,—  
 All but the outcast, Man He fabricates  
 The sword that stabs his peace; he cherisheth  
 The snakes that gnaw his heart; he raiseth up  
 The tyrant, whose delight is in his woe,  
 Whose sport is in his agony.

*Mab*, III, 196-203

The view expressed here is not a transient one, for it points toward the subjective and idealistic view expressed in *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelley, like Milton, believed that man's ills were largely of his own making; free will put man outside of the law. In *Prometheus* man is represented as having a mind which has power to create good and evil as it sees fit, with power to heed or not to heed Nature's silent eloquence. Neither good nor evil are imposed upon the world by extraneous gods. Good is inherent in the universe, which works toward its own inscrutable ends; evil is also inherent and not imposed by an omnipotent Demon.<sup>1</sup> When Asia asks Demogorgon who made the earth, thought, passion, reason, will, imagination—he answers, God. And when she inquires who made terror, madness, crimes, remorse, and Hell—Demogorgon answers, He reigns. This would seem to

<sup>1</sup> The above verses are similarly used to explain man's relation to evil by Mrs. O. W. Campbell, *Shelley and the Unromantics*, pp. 204 ff. Contrarily Clutton-Brock (p. 198) says: "For the great mass of men . . . have a sense that evil is in the nature of man and to some extent his own fault, not imposed upon him by a celestial tyrant." Many have assumed as does Clutton-Brock, that Shelley thought of evil as imposed upon the world by a celestial tyrant, and this misinterpretation has been used to prove how little Shelley understood man and nature.



indicate the conventional story of a god who creates and rules the universe. Demogorgon when pressed admits that he speaks "but as ye speak," that is, he is employing the merely conventional phraseology. His rather evasive remarks point, not to an omnipotent creator, but only to Jupiter. But Asia cannot believe that Jupiter can be the supreme power because he trembled like a slave at Prometheus's curse. Demogorgon answers that all spirits are enslaved which serve things evil. But there is another reason why Jupiter is not omnipotent. For the conventional symbol of godhead, Jupiter, is practically the creation of Prometheus, who not only gave him power, but placed a restriction upon that power:

Then Prometheus  
Gave wisdom, which is strength, to Jupiter,  
And with this law alone, "Let man be free,"  
Clothed him with dominion of wide Heaven.

Act II, Scene iv, 43-46.

Shelley here takes the position of the subjective idealist. Man's own wisdom (symbolized by Prometheus) creates earth, thought, passion, reason, will, imagination, terror, madness, crimes, remorse, and hell. Mind is the author of good and evil alike, of its gods and tyrants. "Soul is the only element," as he said in *Queen Mab*, and all things to some degree are sentient. The minutest atom (whether we admit that there is a physical realm or not) comprehends a world of loves and hates; these beget evil and good and the germs of pain and pleasure.<sup>2</sup> The eternal world (matter or spirit) contains at once the evil and the cure.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Queen Mab*, IV, 140-50

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, VI, 32.

This dualism of opposing forces within an essential monism (all is spirit) is symbolized in the *Revolt of Islam* in the struggle between the eagle and the serpent

Know then, that from the depth of ages old,  
Two powers o'er mortal things dominion hold  
Ruling the world with a divided lot,  
Immortal, all-pervading, manifold,  
Twin Genii, equals Gods. . . .<sup>4</sup>

But in spite of occasional statements of this sort, and in spite of his periods of deep melancholy, Shelley was essentially an optimist.<sup>5</sup> Soul, the only element, regardless of this intestine war, was incorruptible. The good would slowly and surely triumph. Truth had only to confront falsehood to vanquish it. He notes that new life succeeds decay and makes an analogy between this process and good and evil: good must succeed evil. He imagines cycles in the matter of morals as in the seasons in a way which reminds one of Heraclitus. He followed Godwin in believing that man's reason would hasten the slow upward trend of creation toward perfection. But the transcendental belief in the power of mind grew on Shelley as a result of his classical study, as it never had on Godwin. In this he was a typical Romanticist, as Godwin was an eighteenth-century rationalist. "Shelley believed with

<sup>4</sup> *Revolt of Islam*, Canto I, xxv; see also Canto IX, xxvii.

<sup>5</sup> In the *Essay on Christianity*, although evil now is ascendant, he says that there will come a time, perhaps after the termination of this life, which is a dream, when "the human mind shall be visited exclusively by the influences of the benignant Power."

Schiller," says Medwin,<sup>6</sup> that mankind had only to will, and that there should be no evil, and would be none. That man could be so perfectionized as to be able to expel evil from his own nature, and from the greater part of creation, was the cardinal point of his system; and he had so conquered himself and his own passions, that he was a living testimony to the truth of his doctrine." This overstates the case certainly, but it is representative of Shelley in his optimistic mood. Good and evil are both states of mind. "To the pure all things are pure," he says in the *Revolt of Islam*; but Shelley also said that evil minds, too, have power to "change good to their own nature."<sup>7</sup> Jupiter, a creature of fear and hate, owed his existence to the hate in the mind of Prometheus; false gods and tyrants keep their places because of our hatred and fear. When the evil feeling in the mind of the Titan turned to pity for the tyrant, Jupiter fell; similarly the Fury, sent to torture the Titan, vanished when he heard words of pity from the lips of his victim. So all false gods and tyrants must fall when man ceases to fear, and all evil will lose its power in the world when man no

<sup>6</sup> Medwin, *Life of Shelley*, I, 338 Compare

"The mind is its own place, and in itself

Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven"

(*Paradise Lost*, I, 254-55).

<sup>7</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, I, 380-88 Mrs Campbell asserts that Shelley thought evil had no power to create. See the lines which Prometheus speaks to the Furies, which Mrs Campbell quotes on p. 206, apparently without noticing that they contradict her statement on the previous page. See also Act I, lines 465-72, in which the Second Fury admits that as the rose gives color to the vestal's cheek, so the victim's agony is that which invests the furies with form; "Else are we shapeless as our mother Night"

longer is moved by hatred. The cycle when love is dominant must then ensue to run its course. But while Shelley's idealism was so largely subjective, it was not entirely so. Reluctantly, perhaps, he recognized an objective reality also, a reality which was sometimes very compelling. Evil, too, had its objective counterpart.

## II

Shelley follows the Platonists in believing that everyone seeks the true, which is the good and the beautiful, and that when the true is found it is instantly recognized as such, and the recognition is inevitably attended with pleasure. The great service of poetry is that it discovers the way to truth. Poetry is the expression of the imagination, a principle within the human being which enables it to act upon materials of sense and to make a harmony out of them. Reason, upon which science depends, is an analytic process, and would in itself be powerless to discover truth. Poetry and the other arts are essentially useful in establishing contact with the infinite and eternal, in making a harmonious world out of chaos. If the basis of art then is the discovery of truth (the good), in how far is the artist justified in concerning himself with error (evil)?

The difficulty with the intellectualist theory, as everyone knows, is that one can never be sure of what is truth; for in spite of Shelley's belief that truth is self-evident, there are no criteria by which we can immediately separate the transient from the eternal. If we put the emphasis upon the good we shall then be forced to exclude from the work of art everything not of an uplift-

ing nature. This, as has been shown in chapter i, was Shelley's first tendency. He would have a poetry in which metaphorical language would be a sort of sugar-coating for moral pills; a theater which would be the instrument for moral instruction; and an architecture without useless ornament. If evil was shown, it was to act as a scarecrow to frighten people away from it. This attitude was gradually modified, both in his theory and practice, until he wrote *The Cenci* and the *Defense*. In the preface to his tragedy and in letters written about it, he expounded an aesthetic theory which was broader than he had really attained, or than he was able to maintain in his later work. Sometimes we find that his optimism fails and then his faith in the power of Beauty and Truth to put Ugliness and Falsehood to rout wavers. Probably there is always danger that someone like the Iberian Priest will appear,

who, never in his mildest dreams  
Felt awe from grace or loveliness, . . .<sup>8</sup>

But generally Shelley firmly maintains the invincibility of what he understands to be truth. "That which is false will ultimately be controverted by its own falsehood," he says in the *Letter to Lord Ellenborough*. "That which is true needs but publicity to be acknowledged." And so in the *Ode to Naples* he boldly bids one to look upon the false:

Gaze on Oppression, till at that dread risk  
Aghast she passes from the Earth's disk:  
Fear not, but gaze—for freemen mightier grow,  
And slaves more feeble, gazing on their foe.

—Lines 85-88.

<sup>8</sup> *Revolt of Islam*, XII, x.

And in *Epipsyichidion* he celebrates the power of imagination, the artistic faculty, to vanquish error:

Imagination! which from earth and sky,  
And from the depths of human fantasy  
As from a thousand prisms and mirrors, fills  
The Universe with glorious beams, and kills  
Error, the worm, with many a sun-like arrow  
Of its reverberated lightning.

—Lines 164–69.

But when we turn again to the lines about the inherent nature of both good and evil, we must suppose that no victory can be permanent; that after the light, darkness will return—to be again vanquished.

### III

Shelley has the Plotinean notion of creation as a falling-away from the perfection of the ideal. This he holds to be true of the artist's work as well as of the mundane world, for he tells us in the *Defense* that "the mind in creation is as a fading coal"; that "when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet." This world, as Plato taught, is but a poor shadow of reality; and for the weak organs of mortals perhaps it is necessary to veil the radiancy of the eternal, "to temper this planetary music." This admixture of dross or error in all things of this life, even in art, may, he thinks, be necessary, or at least expedient. The Woman in the *Revolt of Islam* (Canto I, iv.), unable to sustain the untempered sight of

the Spirit, dissolves and vanishes. And when the mere shadow of beauty falls on the poet himself, he shrieks and clasps his hands in ecstasy. So beauty is ever veiled. But the veil which shrouds everything in this life we are to regard as a temporary dress, he tells us in the *Defense*. The poet considers the vices of his contemporaries as "the temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the eternal portions of their beauty. An epic or dramatic personage is understood to wear them around his soul, as he may the ancient armor or modern uniform around his body"; but the poet indicates that he could conceive of a character wearing a more graceful garment than either, i.e., a character less obscured by evil, a more highly idealized character. Such a one was his Prometheus, and, to a lesser extent, such was Laon and such was Cythna. Prometheus was as nearly perfect a character as the author could conceive, or more accurately, record.

## IV

It is plain that his tendency is not "truth to life," but truth to the ideal, the attainment of perfection, as nearly as that is possible. To Shelley it is the element of the ideal alone which makes things of the world intelligible or pleasant, or works of art worth while.

'Tis the melodious hue of beauty thrown  
 Athwart the darkness and the glare of pain  
 Which humanize and harmonize the strain.<sup>9</sup>

Error itself cannot be beautiful, but it may indirectly contribute to beauty. He described the Medusa in death

<sup>9</sup> On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery.

gazing on heaven as "The tempestuous loveliness of terror"; the brazen glare of the serpents, "kindled by error," makes an ever-shifting mirror of the vaporous air, which reflects all that beauty and terror. As beauty is associated with goodness, so ugliness is joined to evil. Thus the Devil in *Peter Bell the Third*:

He was that heavy, dull, cold thing,  
The spirit of evil well may be. . . .

and in spite of attempts to get away from this moralistic notion, it crops out continually.

Shelley lived so much in an ideal, subjective world of imagination that he was not always aware of the boundaries of the mundane and the poetic-ideal. On certain occasions, he said, ideas may have the force of sensations, and this statement seems to furnish the key to those otherwise inexplicable incidents in his life which Peacock, Jeaffreson, and others regarded as mere hallucinations. This confusion of the objective and subjective also led to a confusion of the standards of life and of art. Of course Shelley was aware that art is not life; but nevertheless he frequently judged the creations of art by the common standards of conduct. Thus, in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* he says that "the only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus is Satan; and Prometheus is, in my judgment, a more poetical character than Satan because, in addition to courage, and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the traits of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement, which, in the Hero



of *Paradise Lost*, interfere with the interest." Poetry, we must infer from this, is essentially concerned with beauty, goodness, perfection; with the ideal, in short; and ugliness and evil are a blight upon it, or at best, a veil to dim the too dazzling radiance of "nature's naked loveliness."

The admiration which Shelley felt for Milton's Satan was prompted by the sympathy which one rebel inevitably feels for another. His praise of Milton for lack of moral purpose is founded upon misapprehension. Shelley failed to note Milton's plain statement of his moral purpose. Furthermore, Shelley's sympathy with the rebel in conflict with despotic authority made the rebel look like the hero of the poem, the moral equal or the superior of the God.

But all things have potential beauty. Thus the Spirit of Earth says:

Come, wouldst thou think that toads, and snakes, and efts,  
 Could e'er be beautiful? Yet so they were,  
 And that with little change of shape or hue.

—III, iv, 74-76.

When one by means of the imagination is able to discover the essential harmony in what sensation presents to the mind, he has found the key to beauty. There is thus a possibility of beauty in everything, and ugliness and evil become indeed a mere garment which covers, but does not conceal.

# V

Shelley was aware that man's curiosity to know all the secrets of life was a powerful factor in determining

what were possible subjects for representation in art, and that what has been called "sympathetic curiosity"<sup>10</sup> was a potent influence in overcoming repugnance, and so making possible an aesthetic attitude. Pain, sadness, gloom, though ordinarily repulsive, are, especially in art, great sources of pleasure. Concerning the element of gloom in *Faust*, Shelley wrote, "And yet the pleasure of sympathizing with emotions known only to few, although they derive their sole charm from despair and the scorn of the narrow good we can attain in our present state, seems more than to ease the pain which belongs to them."<sup>11</sup> And then he adds another explanation for our toleration of evil which harks back to the moralistic doctrine of Plato, later modified by the Christians: that the evil of this world will be compensated for in the next. "Perhaps," continued Shelley, "all discontent with the less (to use a Platonic sophism) supposes the sense of a just claim to the greater, and that we admirers of Faust are on the right road to Paradise."

When he wrote the Preface to *The Cenci*, his concern with evil ostensibly did not go beyond the satisfaction of insight, made as attractive as possible through the various appeals to sense which are possible in poetic drama. He admits the necessity of increasing the ideal in order to overcome an actual horror of the events; that the senses must be charmed by the poetry in order to mitigate the pain of contemplating such moral deformity. Otherwise he has attempted to represent the characters as they probably were. "Such a story" as that of

<sup>10</sup> Parker, *Principles of Aesthetics*, p. 102.

<sup>11</sup> To Mrs. Gisborne, April 10, 1822.

the Cenci family, "if told so as to present to the reader all the feelings of those who once acted it, their hopes and fears, their confidences and misgivings, their various interests, passions, and opinions, acting upon and with each other, yet all conspiring to one tremendous end, would be as a light to make apparent some of the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart." These dark and secret caverns of the heart arouse his curiosity; it would give one a certain pleasure as well as profit to look into them, no matter how fearful, and for that reason this story of incest he thought eminently fit for dramatic representation—though no one else in his day thought so.

Incest as a poetic and dramatic theme was very alluring to Shelley, partly, it may be said (no matter how shocking or paradoxical such a statement would have been to many of Shelley's early critics) because of the moralism which made him a rebel against conventional morality. But as a motif for free aesthetic expression Shelley regarded this grim theme as eminently poetic. "Incest is, like many other incorrect things," he wrote, "a very poetical circumstance. It may be the excess of love or hate. It may be the defiance of everything for the sake of another which clothes itself in the glory of the highest heroism; or it may be that cynical rage which, confounding the good and the bad in existing opinions, breaks through them for the purpose of rioting in selfishness and antipathy."<sup>12</sup> As an example of the former we have Laon and Cythna; and of the latter Count Cenci. In both of these stories our reconciliation to evil

<sup>12</sup> To Mrs. Gisborne, November 16, 1819.

comes through the admiration for heroism; the heroism of the essentially good Laon and Cythna, and of Beatrice, though the latter is supposed to be suffering through a characteristic blemish. Even a slight measure of admiration can be accorded the wicked Count, for he too had some heroic traits, notably fearlessness and great will-power.

Besides the satisfaction of imaginative insight, there is in Shelley's attitude toward the problem of evil in these poems a leaning toward the Aristotelean doctrine of "the tragic flaw." This is particularly true of *The Cenci*, for *Laon and Cythna* was not meant to be a tragic poem. But *The Cenci* was called a tragedy, and in the Preface Shelley explains that Beatrice, had she been a perfect character, would have realized that "no person can be truly dishonored by the act of another; and the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance, and a resolution to convert the injurer from his dark passions by peace and love." This is what the idealistic philosopher and the moralist would have done; what Prometheus did: he recalled the curse which he had pronounced and so brought to an end the evil of which he himself was the true author. But Beatrice is not an idealized representation of the poet himself. She is meant to be an objective character, to represent one who had actually lived. If Beatrice had thought as Prometheus thought she would have been wiser and better; "but she would never have been a tragic character." This flaw in her character is necessary to explain the sequence of events, and, as Aristotle would have it, necessary to justify the catastrophe. Furthermore, Shel-

ley adds that a defect in the moral make-up of a character is necessary in order that the audience, also imperfect, may be able to enter sympathetically into her sorrows and their revenge. The very dramatic quality of the piece, Shelley says, is dependent upon the struggle between the recognition of her having done evil and the effort to justify it, which takes place in the mind of the spectator.

## VI

The growth of a free aesthetic attitude toward the subject matter of art, which has several times been alluded to, is further noticeable in the poet's attitude toward the comic, and in statements such as those in the *Defense* where he says that imperfection in poetry does not consist so much in the *presence* of things connected with the external and the temporal as in the *absence* of those elements which belong to the inner faculties of our nature; that the incomparable perfection of the ancients consisted in the harmony of all elements.

Shelley's early condemnation of comedy was due not merely to a defective sense of humor, but to an excess of sensibility. The comic characters of the day gave him no pleasant sense of superiority; he felt, on the one hand, pity for what seemed to him to be society's unfortunates, and, on the other, responsibility and guilt for their deplorable ignorance and utter lack of dignity. The comic became, through excess of sympathy, pathetic. He thought that neither the authors nor the theater-going audience had any sympathy for the objects of their mirth, and hence humor was superseded by wit. This, as

he says in the *Defense*, was ever the situation in periods when morals were in a low state. Comic poetry in such periods sinks to the merely superficial, or the obscene. If we laugh at all it is from self-complacency and triumph, instead of pleasure; "malignity, sarcasm, and contempt, succeed to sympathetic merriment." The comic of this nature he would condemn because there is in it none of the universal, and because the evil, the temporal, is not reconciled to the good and the eternal; the element of harmony is absent.

## VII

Shelley seems to have made no direct statement as to the solution of the problem of evil through the pathetic. There is, however, a statement or two indirectly bearing on the subject. The following, while it grew out of Shelley's early reading of Godwin and the Necessarians, sounds exactly like the position taken today by some sociologists; it is the attitude revealed in such dramas as Hauptmann's *Die Weber*, and Galsworthy's *Justice*. Man is the creature of circumstance; he is molded by his environment and hence can hardly be blamed even for his crimes. In the *Defense* Shelley says that "crime is disarmed of half its horror and all its contagion by being represented as the fatal consequence of the unfathomable agencies of nature; error is thus divested of its wilfulness; men can no longer cherish it as the creation of their choice." Viewing drama of this sort, one finds little either to hate or to blame. One's imagination is enlarged by it and he is given knowledge of the world and of the nature of his own heart.

In his review of *Frankenstein*, Shelley adopts this tolerant attitude toward the monster. He pities the creature because his original goodness was, by the force of circumstances, turned into misanthropy and revenge. Although his crimes are indeed withering and tremendous, they are not the offspring of an original propensity to evil, "but flow irresistibly from certain causes fully adequate to their production. They are all children as it were of Necessity and Human Nature."<sup>18</sup> This, it will be noted, is in a vein very different from the transcendental and subjective philosophy of *Prometheus, Julian and Maddalo*, and the *Sensitive Plant*.

## VIII

The deliberate or inadvertent utilization of pain to produce pleasure is met with frequently in Shelley. This is the work of a power which he attempts to describe in the second paragraph of the *Defense*. "But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in a lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds and motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them." There is a transcendental power inherent in the mind which is able to harmonize the incongruous materials of sense into works of art. By the aid of this divine gift the poet is able to make out of his own sufferings and the dross and error of the world something which bears the stamp of beauty; through this faculty, which indeed the poet is not master of, he participates in "the eternal, the infi-

<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Medwin, *Life of Shelley*, I, 260-66

nite, and the one." Hence, in so far as he is a poet, as he is the author of the highest wisdom and pleasure, the poet ought to be the happiest and best of men.

Poetry turns all things to loveliness, it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union, under its light yoke, all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes; its sweet alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life; it strips the veil of familiarity from the world and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty, which is the spirit of its form.

The transmutation of error, pain, and evil by the poet's imaginative faculty is alluded to more than once. Indeed, he held that suffering is an important source of art, for he says that

Most wretched men

Are cradled into poetry by wrong:

They learn in suffering what they teach in song."<sup>14</sup>

And the force and sweetness of their singing may be in direct proportion to the severity of the pain:

Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.<sup>15</sup>

This magic which enables the poet to turn poison to potable gold and sadness to sweet song is the harmonizing, the regulating and unifying power of poetry. Shelley has in mind here the charming and stabilizing power of rhythm, both of sound and of thought. It is possible in these passages and in certain statements in the *De-*

<sup>14</sup> *Julian and Muddalo*, 544-45

<sup>15</sup> *Skylark*, 90



*fense* in regard to rhythm, that we get an echo of Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, in which the older poet accounts for our being able, not only to endure, but to enjoy, themes like that of *Macbeth* because the rhythm regulates and stabilizes our emotions. This harmonizing element Shelley also calls love, which to him was the law of the universe, and beauty, the creative and supporting power of the world. Love is, of course, attracted to the perfect, but love also has a sublimating and harmonizing power and can reproduce its image in that which it contemplates. The power of love to produce happiness was early recognized by Shelley, and so was its constant attendant, pain.<sup>16</sup> The poetical faculty, he says, has as one of its functions the engendering of a desire to reproduce and to arrange the materials presented to it "according to a certain rhythm or order which may be called the beautiful and the good."<sup>17</sup> This process of making rhythmical has the effect of absorbing the evil, at least of making it innocuous. The recognition of this underlying principle in the ancient poets aroused Shelley's enthusiasm for them, and caused him to defend them as moral.

The power of poetry to quell passion is described in Shelley's last work. The meaning of the obscure reference to Rousseau seems to be that Rousseau, who was overcome by his own heart alone,<sup>18</sup> came to his sad end because he was always a slave to his passions. There is a severe classical note in Shelley here which contrasts

<sup>16</sup> See the letter to Hogg, January 2, 1811.

<sup>17</sup> *Defense of Poetry*, 52.

<sup>18</sup> *Triumph of Life*, 240-41.

curiously with his own impulsive emotional nature, and with the spontaneity of much of his work. But he had a deep admiration for the restraint of the classical poets; his belief in the efficacy of rhythm and harmony to overcome the lower parts of our natures is clear in the following extract:

See the great bards of elder time, who quelled  
The passions which they sung as by their strain  
May well be known: their living melody  
Tempers its own contagion to the vein  
Of those who are infected with it. . . .

Thus genuine poetry, to paraphrase Wordsworth, has power to restrain as well as to enkindle. But Rousseau continues,

. . . I  
Have suffered what I wrote, or viler pain!  
And so my words have seeds of misery. . . .<sup>19</sup>

With the lines in mind regarding the relation of suffering and song, we cannot believe that Rousseau's fault lay in the fact that he had suffered evil in his life, but in that he failed in his writing to harmonize the conflicting elements. He is a reporter of facts, and not a true singer. Shelley, in his earlier years, read Rousseau with much pleasure and names him in the *Defense* as one of the poets who have contributed to the progress of the world; but in this last work Shelley sees what was true of the great Frenchman—that there was in him a deplorable lack of that fundamental principle of harmony, of adjustment to the basic facts of life, which vitiated his work—a charge which many have made against Shelley

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 274-80

himself. But Shelley's work, while often at odds with the mundane fact, is consistent with, and in harmony with, that subjective world of ideas which was so real to him; and his concern was to represent that world in poetry. Most of the things of this mundane sphere were to him temporal, fleeting things of error and evil. When he was not indulging flights of sheer fancy for the pure pleasure of it, or crying out against the pains of life, or attempting to change society to fit his ideals, he was occupied with the question of reconciling the temporal with the timeless; the many with the one. That there is a value in knowing evil he was aware, and in *The Cenci* his avowed purpose was to explore some of the darkest caverns of the human heart, though not as a mere reporter. These dark places, he believed, can be made light, and the pains of life can be made into music by the power of poetry.

### CHAPTER III

## NATURE AND THE IDEAL WORLD OF THE POET

#### I

It has been said that Shelley "had no eyes."<sup>1</sup> One gets an idea of the sweeping and contradictory statements which have been made concerning Shelley's portrayal of nature by contrasting with the above pronouncement the following eulogy, representative of about the same time, i.e., the last decade of the nineteenth century:

I think that Shelley can scarcely be comprehended by those who are not intimately acquainted with Italian landscape. The exceeding truthfulness of his observation of and feeling for it cannot certainly be appreciated except by those who have lived amongst the sights and sounds which took so close a hold upon his imagination and heart. . . . Every line in Shelley's verse which speaks of Italy is pregnant with the spirit of the land. Each line is a picture; true and perfect, whether of day or night, of water or shore, of marsh or garden, of silence or melody.<sup>2</sup>

Another critic finds that when Shelley speaks of natural scenery, the solid earth dissolves, leaving him in the shifting phantasmagoria of cloudland.<sup>3</sup> Still another finds that though *The Cloud* and *The Skylark* do not

<sup>1</sup> William Morris, quoted by Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, (I, 178, and by Clutton-Brock, *Shelley, the Man and the Poet*, p. 134.

<sup>2</sup> Ramée (Ouida), *North American Review*, CL, 246-51.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen, "Hours in a Library," *Cornhill Magazine*, XXXIX, 295.

arouse our affections, yet they may be truer to actual fact than are the representations of Wordsworth. "Strip off the imaginative clothing from *The Cloud*, and science will support every word of it."<sup>4</sup> Still another critic tells us that Shelley is scientifically accurate in his representation of nature, and therefore cold and uninteresting, while Wordsworth and Coleridge, though untrue to nature, tell us what we want to know.<sup>5</sup> But perhaps it is not so easy to determine what is "true to nature." The artist and the scientist alike can only give us interpretations made according to certain points of view; and it is possible for us to give our approval to either, or to both, though they be very different.

Often it is necessary for the reader to relinquish his preconceived notions of the world in order to get any enjoyment out of an author. Sometimes we do this willingly, as when we read *Gulliver* or *Alice in Wonderland*. Many can as easily enter into the world as represented in *Alastor*, or the *Revolt of Islam*, or the *Triumph of Life*. Other readers strenuously resist any departure from their own mode of thought, and, as one critic has said, feel that Shelley formed his idea of nature and of man in a solitary and capricious spirit; that unless the reader surrenders his own judgment to the author's imagination, the parts do not mutually support and explain each other.<sup>6</sup> Yet even this critic admits that to define

<sup>4</sup> Brooke, "Some Thoughts on Shelley," *Macmillan's Magazine*, XLII, 131.

<sup>5</sup> A. A. Jack, *Shelley, an Essay*, pp. 52-56.

<sup>6</sup> Courthope, "Life of Alexander Pope," *Pope's Works*, ed. by Elwin and Courthope, V, 273.

with mathematical precision what is meant by "Nature" is impossible.<sup>7</sup>

## II

Nature has meant many different things in the history of art. Thus at various times men have been praised for what by consensus of opinion was thought to be truthful reporting: in some periods, such as the latter part of the nineteenth century and the present, accurate reporting of all things; at other times, such as the Elizabethan period, of the best things; again, as in the period when the slogan was the "return to nature," of the simplest things. During the Augustan period "natural" seems to have meant not extravagant or passionate; the generally accepted or conventional was the "natural." Thus Rymer<sup>8</sup> thought tragedy must not represent a woman without modesty, and Dryden<sup>9</sup> thought that a lawful prince must not be represented as vicious or without courage. An English translation of Rapin<sup>10</sup> states that "The Sovereign Art of Eloquence is to adhere strictly to nature, the First and Great Original; which yet Men are little acquainted with, by reason of the little care they take to follow her steps, and observe her conduct." This right understanding, the critic continues, can be obtained by means of a profound study of philosophy and by long observation of natural things.

<sup>7</sup> Courthope, *History of English Poetry*, V, 165.

<sup>8</sup> Rymer, *Tragedies of the Last Age*.

<sup>9</sup> Dryden, *The Grounds for Criticism in Tragedy*.

<sup>10</sup> Rapin, *The Whole Critical Works of Monsieur Rapin*, In Two Volumes, Newly Done into English by Several Hands (London, 1706), II, xvii.

At the same time one is admonished "to follow the basic Methods of his own Genius, without introducing so much of subtlety and refinement."

Pope admonishes critics to follow nature, but this, we later learn, is merely admonition to follow the rules established by the ancients, for

Those *Rules* of old discovered, not devis'd,  
Are Nature still, but Nature methodiz'd;

Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem;  
To copy nature is to copy them.<sup>11</sup>

If we should ask a number of people today what "nature" or "natural" means, we should get a variety of answers, ranging from the sentimental notion of Rousseau to the coldly impersonal one of Huxley. Some would insist that the true idea of nature was that which found her the beneficent and bountiful mother; others would present to us the formidable data of science, revealing the niggardliness of nature and the ceaseless struggle for life. More or less sharing one or the other of these opposites, we should encounter many varieties of religious interpretations. And finally, we should meet the idealists and the skeptics. Shelley, like the very chameleon which he said every poet was, shares all of these views. That he had the sentimental notion of nature common to the poets of the Romantic Revival can easily be shown. That he went through various stages of religious regard for nature is equally apparent. He had some notion, too, of evolution and of the conservation of matter and of energy. And finally it can be

<sup>11</sup> *Essay on Criticism*, ll. 39-40, 139-40.

shown that while he often had very sharp eyes for the forms of external nature, he was only indirectly interested in them. He lived in a world of his own,<sup>12</sup> an ideal world, and, playfully or seriously, he often doubted the existence of any world but that narrow realm of which the perception of the moment was the center and circumference. When in a less skeptical mood, the narrow sphere of perception was held to be a miniature of the universe; perceptions were representations of the indefinite world of "things," the shadows of those archetypal, ideal forms which were ruled over by Beauty.

### III

When Shelley was at Oxford he was, according to Hogg's statement, singularly unobservant. He could tell a cauliflower from a rose, says that genial biographer, but his discriminations were not much finer. Indeed, it seems that Hogg's exaggerated statement was at bottom true. There is almost nothing in Shelley's juvenile poems, or in the romances, to show that he was aware of any world but that of books, and it was the world of ruined Gothic castles, robbers, murderers, and yelling ghosts. The persons represented really do make the severest demands upon the imagination of the reader, and the scenes in which they move were as unlike the English landscape of the author's experiences as anything could be. The first indication which we find that

<sup>12</sup> Ce n'est pas l'Univers qu'il nous peint, c'est *son Univers*. Les splendeurs des mondes ont revêtu les couleurs de son âme, elles se sont festonnées des mille arabesques de sa sensibilité (G. Sarrazin, *La Revue de la Poésie Anglaise*, p. 43).



Shelley was developing eyes is in a love poem, presumably addressed to Harriet Grove in April, 1810

Come! Sweet is the hour,  
Soft Zephyrs breathe gently around,  
The Anemone's night-boding flower,  
Has sunk its pale head on the ground

The conventional sort of sentimentality common to very young, and to inferior poets of all periods, is evident here, but however we may dislike the representation, at least we know that Shelley has learned the name of a common spring flower. An interesting comparison is afforded by *The Question*, written just ten years later. In this latter poem Shelley names and describes with a deft touch or two the forms, colors, odors, and habitat of a dozen or more flowers. In the juvenile volume containing the verses to Harriet Grove we find also, in the "Irishman's Song," a representation of the world of men in which it is possible to recognize under the Gothic lumber the actual political situation.

Shelley's important points of contact with the world of physical phenomena and of men came through his reading the French materialists and their English followers, and through his unsystematic experimentation in chemistry and electricity. To Godwin he gives credit for having awakened him from the "intellectual sickliness" which gave rise to the "distempered though unoriginal," *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*. Godwin's *Political Justice*, he says, "opened to my mind fresh and more extensive views. . . . I was no longer the votary of romance; till then I had existed in an ideal world—now I found that in this universe of ours was enough to excite

the interest of the heart, enough to employ the discussions of reason; I beheld, in short, that I had duties to perform."<sup>13</sup>

Magic now gave way to chemistry and physics (though it must be admitted his attitude toward physical science was that of play), and romancing gave way to attempts at social reform. Had these prospered it is possible that Shelley would have developed into a man of affairs instead of into a poet. From Mrs. Shelley's notes to the poems, from the fragment *On Love*, and from other sources it seems apparent that Shelley's love of nature was a secondary thing; his first interest, as evidence presented in the first chapter shows, was moral science; his love of nature was rather the result of his isolation from the world of men. When we cannot love the higher forms we love the lower. "Hence in solitude, or in that deserted state when we are surrounded by human beings, and yet they sympathize not with us, we love the flowers, the grass, and the waters; and the sky. In the motion of the very leaves of spring in the blue air, there is then found a secret correspondence with our heart;" His failure in the world of affairs is also largely responsible for his rebuilding of an ideal world, but this time on a classical and not a Gothic foundation, though the researcher can find many a stone from the more barbarous style.

The notion expressed in Shelley's early work that nature is good, bountiful, and loving, he derived principally from Rousseau. Harmony, Shelley often says, is the law of nature, or conversely, nature is harmony. In

<sup>13</sup> Letters to Godwin, January 10 and March 8, 1812.

*Queen Mab* all inharmonious elements he calls "unnatural." He goes so far as to say that the tiger cub's appetite for flesh is unnatural; poisonous plants are unnatural; man's depravity is due to his departure from the path of nature, to his "unnatural" habits of life. Nature not only formed the world in beauty and unchanging harmony, gave the happy birds their homes, gave the lovely silence to the inhabitants of the sea, but "filled the meanest worm that crawls in dust with spirit, thought, and love." The curious thing about the representation of nature in *Mab* is that while all was ruled by a fixed and immutable necessity, where every atom acted but as it could and must act, yet man and beast alike had somehow gotten out of step with natural law. While Shelley leaned instinctively toward a monistic philosophy he was here caught in a very bad philosophic confusion because his allegiance was about equally divided between the sentimental naturalists and the material necessitarians. The dualistic conception of nature, dramatized so vividly in the first canto of the *Revolt of Islam*, marks a falling away from his early naturalism, and the passages in the same poem which urge the transcendental power of mind to control matter mark his departure from the tenets of the mechanists. The transition from the worship of the Spirit of Nature to the worship of Beauty that we see in the *Hymn* only waited upon the replacement of naturalism by idealism, which came through the study of Berkeley, Spinoza, and Plato.

## IV

Although external nature was neither Shelley's first nor last interest, there can be no doubt that he was ex-

traordinarily sensitive to his surroundings. In 1817 he wrote to Godwin his belief that he was formed "to apprehend minute and remote distinctions of feeling, whether relative to external nature or the living beings which surround us, and to communicate the conceptions which result from considering either the moral or the material universe as a whole." In 1821 he wrote to Clare Clairmont: "The wind, the light, the air, the smell of a flower affects me with violent emotions." The effect of the Italian climate is described in a letter to Peacock: "No sooner had we arrived in Italy, than the loveliness of the earth and the serenity of the sky made the greatest difference in my sensations. I depend on these things for life; for in the smoke of cities, and the tumult of human kind, and the chilling fogs and rains of our own country, I can hardly be said to live."

The effect of nature upon poets and poetry he believed to be very great. "Poets—the best of them—are a very cameleon-like [*sic*] race; they take the colour not only of what they feed on, but of the very leaves under which they pass."<sup>14</sup> The greatness of classical Greek poetry he attributed to this environment. "I now understand," he says in a letter to Peacock,<sup>15</sup>

why the Greeks were such great poets, and above all, I can account, it seems to me, for the harmony, the unity, the perfection, the uniform excellence, of all their works of art. They lived in a perpetual commerce with external nature, and nourished themselves upon the spirit of its forms. Their theatres were all open to the mountains and the sky. Their columns, the ideal type of a

<sup>14</sup> To the Gisbornes, July 17, 1821. The same statement is made in the *Defense*.

<sup>15</sup> January 26, 1819

sacred forest, with its roof of interwoven tracery, admitted the light and wind; the odour and freshness of the country penetrated the cities. Their temples were mostly upaithric; and the flying clouds, the stars, or the deep sky, were seen above.

The people of Pompeii also lived in harmony with nature, "and the interstices of their incomparable columns were portals, as it were, to admit the spirit of beauty which animates this glorious universe to visit those whom it inspired."<sup>10</sup>

The influence upon the poems of the place where Shelley wrote has been commented upon by many writers. Many have seen the journey down the Reuss and the Rhine and the boating excursion up the Thames reflected in *Alastor*, Bisham wood in the *Revolt of Islam*, and the airy heights of the Baths of Caracalla in *Prometheus Unbound*. In such a poem as *Mont Blanc* we have what its author called an undisciplined overflowing of the soul, which rests its claim to approbation on an attempt to imitate the untamable wildness and inaccessible solemnity of the mountain. He further says that it was composed under immediate impression of the deep and powerful feelings excited by the objects which it attempts to describe.

# v

Shelley's powers of observation grew with use, and when he wished, he could record his observation with precision. Nothing could surpass the following lines for

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* It will be noted that the Spirit of Nature or Necessity is not now the animating power of the universe; that it has been replaced by the Spirit of Beauty. Naturalism has given way to idealism.

clear-cut reporting; there is not a simile or other figure, nor a "poetic" word:

There is no dew on the dry grass tonight,  
Nor damp within the shadow of the trees;  
The wind is intermitting, dry and light;  
And in the inconstant motion of the breeze  
The dust and straws are driven up and down,  
And whirled about the pavement of the town.<sup>17</sup>

The fact is that Shelley's grasp of what popularly passes for reality was greater than is often supposed. Everyone has read about the inexplicable attacks made upon the poet at Keswick, Tanyrallt, Pisa, etc., about his forgetting whether or not he had dined; about his inability to live within his income; about his impossible invitation to Harriet to come to Switzerland to reside near Mary and himself; and many other details which make him appear a helpless and rather ludicrous figure. Statements like Trelawny's that the poet "had seen no more of the working-day world than a girl at a boarding school" have had extensive circulation. But the fact is that Shelley had a rather wide experience of life, and most of it left its mark, because it was of an unpleasant nature. It is not to my purpose to go into detail in this matter, for the evidence has long since been placed before the public by Shelley's most competent biographers. But when we consider Shelley's aid to Godwin, Hunt, Peacock, and a host of unknown pensioners we must acknowledge that for one who was not interested in money, he did pretty well with his income. In walking the hospitals in London, in visiting the sick and indi-

<sup>17</sup> "Evening, Ponte al Mare, Pisa."

gent wherever he lived, in his efforts to aid in the reclamation work at Tremadoc, in his dealings with his father's lawyers, and with money-lenders, Shelley came to close grips with "life." For a time it is probable that he was employed as an actor<sup>18</sup> of Shakespearean rôles. He kept himself well informed on the political situation, both in England and on the continent. His domestic experience was, certainly, more than usually eventful; death came five times into his circle. He was gray before he was thirty; he used to say that he was older than his father, or that he was a hundred years old. When we add to all these factors his extensive travels and his very wide reading we might well conclude that it was not for lack of experience with, or knowledge about, life that he failed to interest his contemporaries in his art. It was not because of a monkish seclusion from life.

His own opinion was that his education had been singularly well adapted for developing native poetic talent. In the Preface to the *Revolt of Islam* he says that there is a type of education without which genius and sensibility can hardly fill the circle of their capacities. Circumstances to him had been favorable.

I have been familiar from boyhood with mountains and lakes and the sea, and the solitude of forests: Danger, which sports upon the brink of precipices, has been my playmate. I have trodden the glaciers of the Alps, and lived under the eye of Mont Blanc. I have been a wanderer among distant fields. I have sailed down mighty rivers, and seen the sun rise and set, and the stars

<sup>18</sup> Ingpen, *Shelley in England*, pp. 485-89. For further discussion of Shelley's grasp of mundane facts, see Symonds, *Shelley*, "E.M.L. Series," pp. 62-63, 121; and Clutton-Brock, *Shelley, the Man and the Poet*, p. 20.

come forth, whilst I have sailed night and day down a rapid stream among mountains. I have seen populous cities, and have watched the passions which rise and spread, and sink and change amongst assembled multitudes of men. I have seen the theatre of the more visible ravages of tyranny and war; cities and villages reduced to scattered groups of black and roofless houses, and the naked inhabitants sitting famished upon their desolated thresholds. I have conversed with living men of genius. The poetry of Ancient Greece and Rome, and modern Italy, and our own country, has been to me, like external nature, a passion and an enjoyment. Such are the sources from which the materials for the imagery of my poem have been drawn.

## VI

Shelley sometimes reveals a conception of the universe surprisingly close to that of the scientist. The conservation of matter and of energy seems to have been understood by him early in life; in *Queen Mab* he said:

There's not an atom of yon earth  
 But once was living man;  
 Nor the minutest drop of rain  
 That hangeth in its thinnest cloud,  
 But flowed in human veins.

The conservation theory and the cycle of life and death are expressed also in the *Lines Written on Hearing the News of the Death of Napoleon*:

"Still alive and still bold," shouted Earth,  
 "I grow bolder and still more bold  
 The dead fill me ten thousandfold  
 Fuller of speed, and splendour, and mirth  
 I was cloudy and sullen, and cold,  
 Like a frozen chaos uprolled,  
 Till by the spirit of the mighty dead  
 My heart grew warm. I feed on whom I fed."



His frequent references to the "great chain of nature" indicate that he had some conception of evolution. In a letter to Miss Hitchener he says: "As the soul which now animates this frame was once the vivifying principle of the lowest link in the chain of existence, so it is ultimately destined to attain the highest"; doubtless a mixture of evolution and transmigration. Dr. Todhunter sees in *Prometheus* evidences of belief in evolution, but evolution of a transcendental, Hegelian type, with periods in which the harmonious principle is ascendant, and periods in which discordant evil obstructs progress and Prometheus is chained to the rocks.

The discords in the social scheme of his day were painfully apparent to Shelley; and while he found in external nature a refuge from the hostility of men, he was in his maturity aware of discords there too. Mount Blanc, with its accumulated steepes, is

A desert peopled by the storms alone,  
Save when the eagle brings some hunter's bone.  
And the wolf tracks her there—how hideously  
Its shapes are heaped around! rude, bare, and high,  
Ghastly and scarred, and riven.

Yet while generally agreeing with those critics who find a scientific trend in Shelley's representation of nature, one must conclude that the value of such poems as *The Cloud* does not depend upon the condition that if we "strip off the imaginative clothing," "science will support every word of it." Neither is it true that Shelley's nature poetry is relatively uninteresting because too "true," while other poetry, Wordsworth's for example, though false to nature, tells us what we want to know.

The just opinion lies halfway between these criticisms. For while the warp of Shelley's nature poetry may be scientific, the woof is ideal, imaginative, and warmly emotional. Shelley avoided a too close observance of particulars, believing, as did the eighteenth-century classicists, that the close attention to detail robbed the work of art of the necessary universality.

## VII

Sensitive as Shelley was to external nature, it was not of the highest interest to him; for although he attributed the greatness of Greek art largely to a close contact with nature, and named it first in the elements of the poet's education, nature was significant to Shelley for three reasons: (1) He could not, of course, fail to recognize the informing presence of beauty there; (2) the improved health which a life in the sun gave him would certainly make him react favorably toward his external environment; but more important than these was the fact that (3) external nature afforded relief from what was irksome in the social and moral world. More than once he spins his "shroud of talk" to hide himself from "the sun of this familiar life," which, after all, is only a quaint mockery. Or, like the Indian in the *Unfinished Drama*, finds a moment of paradise in sleep a half-compensation for a hell of waking sorrow. Shelley wanted to change the world to suit his ideals. As a reformer he was a signal failure; his most cherished ideas met with such hostility that he was virtually forced into exile. Ostensibly he retired from the world of men to nature; but nature in turn became a point of depar-

ture for the world of the idealist and the mystic. As one critic<sup>19</sup> has pointed out, Shelley, while he utilized natural imagery, never found natural forms and objects a means of communication with the supernatural being, as did Wordsworth. Instead he found that the spirit with which he wished to stand face to face was always imprisoned behind the natural forms. The world is the veil which hides reality.

To a practical-minded person Shelley's apparent refusal to recognize the conventional limitations of life is very irritating. One writer asserts that Shelley hoped to change the essential feelings about life, and struggled to remove the unchangeable.

Nothing in human life to him was inevitable or fixed; he fancied he could alter it all. His sphere is the "unconditioned"; he floats away into an imaginary Elysium or an expected Utopia; beautiful and excellent, of course, but having nothing in common with the absolute laws of the present world. . . . He is not of our home, nor homely; he describes not our world, but that which is common to all worlds—the Platonic idea of a world. Where it can, his genius soars from the concrete and real to the unknown, and the indefinite, and the void.<sup>20</sup>

As said before, it is difficult to determine, exactly what "our world" is; but it is not difficult to distinguish

<sup>19</sup> A. Hamilton Thompson, "The Mystical Element in English Poetry," *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, Oxford, Vol. VIII.

<sup>20</sup> Bagehot, *Literary Studies*, I, 116. Shelley's ideal world is not entirely Platonic. For comments on his "spurious Platonism," see Symonds, *Shelley*, 86-87; Salt, *A Shelley Primer*, p. 69.

The tendency toward the "unconditioned" or the absolute is characteristic of all true poetry, according to Professor Prescott. See *The Poetic Mind*, p. 110.

an artist who sets out deliberately to report the recognizably constant externality from one who avowedly attempts original imaginative creation. Shelley by "imitation" did not mean reproduction as nearly as possible of external forms, but imitation of the ideal. The resulting absence of the homely qualities accounts in part for the slow growth of his fame. Obviously the points of contact with the average reader are fewer. He has himself described his attitude toward the mundane world in the song of the Fourth Spirit, in Act I of *Prometheus Unbound*:

On a poet's lips I slept  
 Dreaming like a love-adept  
 In the sound his breathing kept;  
 Nor seeks nor finds he mortal blisses,  
 But feeds on the aerial kisses  
 Of shapes that haunt thought's wildernesses.  
 He will watch from dawn to gloom  
 The lake-reflected sun illumine  
 The yellow bees in the ivy-bloom,  
 Nor heed nor see what things they be;  
 But from these create he can  
 Forms more real than living man,  
 Nurslings of immortality!

Those who celebrate Shelley as the greatest of all nature poets dwell upon the unusually sharp observation which must precede such employment of reflected light, but they usually pass over the lines preceding and the lines following. Bees basking in reflected sunlight undoubtedly gave Shelley great pleasure, but their real importance was that they furnished a point of departure

to a region *more real than* earthly phenomena—the world of ideas, though not consistently Platonic.

His attitude toward everything which he looked at is as well revealed in the following statement concerning the handwriting of Tasso, as in the above song: "You know I always seek in what I see the manifestation of something beyond the present and tangible object."<sup>21</sup> There was a meaning in everything beyond the superficial. He saw clouds, sky, sea, the earth, as animate forms, but no more real than the hours, fate, life, or superstition, and perhaps not so real as beauty or love. Facts are of the least importance in poetry, he says somewhere. While he could describe vividly a dry wind whirling the leaves about the pavement, he is seldom interested in those phenomena for themselves. Perhaps he could also have described kings, priests, etc., as the drab mortals which they often are. But he did not think it worth while to linger on the commonplace mundane. The human figures were symbols of a dangerous power, and the representation of the idea "tyrant" was to Shelley the significant thing. The associations which natural objects call up are of far more importance than are the objects themselves. Moreover, to Shelley distinctions such as objective and subjective, perception and idea, plant and animal, animate and inanimate are not absolute, not really valid. In his representation of nature, therefore, he does not usually use simile, but personification, metaphor, and trope; and hence we find that very interesting mythology which has been commented

<sup>21</sup> To Peacock, November 7, 1818.

upon by many critics. These nature myths fall into four classes.

In the first, plant life is represented as having the attributes and emotions of animal or human life. Thus, in the *Unfinished Drama*, he tells about the golden eye of a bright flower:

Through the dark lashes of those veined lids,  
 . . . disencumbered of their silent sleep,  
 Gazed like a star into the morning light  
 Its leaves were delicate, you almost saw  
 The pulses  
 With which the purple velvet flower was fed. . . .

—168-77.

And again he says that

. . . yellow flowers  
 For ever gaze on their own drooping eye ,  
 Reflected in the crystal calm.

—*Alastor*, 406-8.

This is one of the most familiar traits of the Romantic poetry, and poetry of all periods has been full of what Ruskin called the pathetic fallacy,—a departure from literal truth only excusable in moments of emotional stress. Perhaps the *Sensitive Plant* goes farther than any other poem in this direction; so far, indeed, that the plant ceases to be a plant, but becomes a living personality—the poet himself.

The attributing of life and emotions to inanimate objects is also characteristic of poets, just as it is of children and savages. A similarity between Shelley's development of this sort of nature myth with that of the prim-

## 76 SHELLEY: HIS THEORY OF POETRY

itive Aryans has been found by some critics, particularly in his representation of clouds.<sup>22</sup>

And multitudes of dense white fleecy clouds  
Were wandering in thick flocks along the mountains  
Shepherded by the slow, unwilling wind.

—*P.U.*, II, i, 145-47.

And the triumphant storm did flee  
Like a conqueror swift and proud,  
. . . with many a captive cloud

—*Ibid.*, I, 710-12.

Flight and pursuit are often presented, as is the figure of the shepherd and the flocks:

. . . shadows on a grassy hill  
Outrun the winds that chase them, . . .

—*Prince Athanase*, 176-77.

The pale stars are gone!  
For the sun, their swift shepherd,  
To their folds them compelling,  
In the depths of the dawn,  
Hastes, in meteor-eclipsing array, and they flee  
Beyond his blue dwelling,  
As fawns flee the leopard.

—*P.U.*, IV, 1-7.

And every shepherdess of Ocean's flocks,  
Who drives her white waves over the green sea.

—*Witch of Atlas*, X.

. . . the Sirocco  
Awoke, and drove his flock of thunder clouds  
Over the sea horizon.

—*Hellas*, 630-32.

<sup>22</sup> See Sweet, *Shelley's Nature Poetry*.

Clouds, winds, shadows, sun, sea, stars, meteors, thunder, the earth, are favorite personifications of Shelley's, and often he utilizes that which is most vast and formless:

And ye swift whirlwinds, whe on poisèd wings  
Hung mute and moveless o'er yon hushed abyss,  
—*P.U.*, I, 66-67.

Wail, howl aloud, Land and Sea,  
The Earth's rent heart shall answer ye.  
—*Ibid.*, 308-9.

The Spirit saw  
The vast frame of the renovated world  
Smile in the lap of Chaos, . . . .  
—*Daemon of the World*, 325-27.

Times and seasons are as readily imagined by Shelley, and these constitute the third class of myth:

Twilight, ascending slowly from the east,  
Entwined in duskier wreaths her braided locks  
O'er the fair front and radiant eyes of day;  
Night followed, clad with stars.  
—*Alastor*, 337-40.

Once the hungry hours were hounds  
Which chased the day like a bleeding deer,  
—*P.U.*, IV, 73-74.

And pallid Evening twines its beaming hair  
In duskier braids around the languid eyes of Day.  
—*A Summer Evening Churchyard*, 3-4.

Still another group of myths is that made by Shelley out of abstract nouns, such as those naming states of mind or body, or qualities:

. . . . the thick ragged skirts  
Of victorious darkness.  
—*P.U.*, III, ii, 5-6.



And Conquest is dragged captive through the deep; . . .

—*Ibid.*, IV, 556.

Let others flatter Crime, where it sits throned  
In brief Omnipotence: secure are they;  
For Justice, when triumphant, will weep down  
Pity, not punishment, on her own wrongs, . . .

—*P.U.*, I, 401-4.

Desolation is a delicate thing;  
It walks not on the earth, it floats not on the air,  
But treads with lulling footstep, and fans with silent wing  
The tender hopes which in their hearts the best  
and gentlest bear; . . .

—*P.U.*, I, 772-75.

Beneath his feet, 'mongst ghastliest forms,  
repressed

Lay Faith, an obscene worm, who sought to rise,  
While calmly on the Sun he turned his diamond eyes.

—*R. of I.*, 2167-69.

And underneath thy feet writhe Faith, and Folly,  
Custom, and Hell, and mortal Melancholy—

—*Ibid.*, 2185-86.

There is a great number of these personified abstractions. While vital and impressive, they are vague—perhaps more impressive for that reason. The Plague puts her blue kisses upon Laon's lips, and threatens him with Famine, her paramour, and Ruin calls his brother, Death. Despair and Hate are the bloodhounds with which terror hunts error. The goblins of the mind were as awesome to Shelley as witches and devils have been to people in times past, or as various spirits are to primitive people. Yet they were not clear-cut enough to him to have a definite sex. Thus while The Earth is usually

feminine, in Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound*, the Moon calls it "Brother Mine," and its masculine warmth is described as penetrating the frozen frame of the moon.

## VIII

The elements supplied to poetry by mind became increasingly important to Shelley as he matured, much as was the case with Wordsworth and Coleridge. Thus, in the Preface to *Prometheus*, he says that "The imagery which I have employed will be found, 'n many instances, to have been drawn from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed." The spirits, etc., in *Prometheus* are moods of mind made objective.<sup>23</sup> In the *Defense* his position is that the poetic faculty, imagination, is distinctly creative, the source of all new knowledge, though it cannot be controlled by the poet at will.<sup>24</sup> Shelley, like the Greek rhapsodists, composed poetry in moods of sustained enthusiasm, when "possessed" by his muse, when Urania, or another spirit, fanned the inconstant flame of his imagination. The *Ode to Liberty*, he tells us, is sustained by a "great voice," and when the voice dies, the song, like a wild swan, sinks headlong. But it must be remarked, that the dying notes, like those of the swan in the fable, are by far the sweetest. However, consciousness of personality or of individual will seems to have been in abeyance during these periods of crea-

<sup>23</sup> Cf. O.W. Campbell, *Shelley and the Unromantics*, p. 212.

<sup>24</sup> See canceled fragments to the *Ode to Heaven*, ll. 1-4; *Ode to Naples*, ll. 50-51.

tive enthusiasm. That the poet at such times felt a mystical union<sup>25</sup> with the infinite there can be no doubt.

The stream of thought in the dying poet of *Alastor* is fed by two sources: the influxes of sense, "*And his own being unalloyed by pain.*" The soul has its own deep melodies.<sup>26</sup> The human mind, though essentially passive when regarding the external world, both *renders* and *receives* fast influencings, holding an unremitting interchange with the external world. He tells us that the "everlasting universe of things" rolls through the mind "with a sound but half its own," and unites with the stream that flows from the secret springs which are the source of human thought:

The everlasting universe of things  
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—  
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs  
The source of human thought its tribute brings  
Of waters,—with a sound but half its own,  
Such as a feeble brook will oft assume  
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,  
Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,  
Where woods and winds contend and a vast river  
Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.<sup>27</sup>

Compared with the vast river of spirit whose voice almost drowns it, the external world is but a feeble brook. And yet there is a unifying principle, a secret strength, which governs thought, is a law to the infinite

<sup>25</sup> The mystical element is further discussed in the following chapter.

<sup>26</sup> *Lines Written among the Euganean Hills*, l. 365.

<sup>27</sup> "Mont Blanc," l, compare Coleridge, "Ode to Dejection"

dome of heaven, and also inhabits the mountain. This unifying principle which gave a central viewpoint to his conception of nature was in *Queen Mab*, Necessity, the Mother of the World. Later it is love, which is the principle of unity, the constructive force, as hate is the destructive. It is through love that the imagination establishes contact with the eternal and true; and among men love is the secret of morals. But however reverent and awed his regard for external nature may be, for security he returns to his own mind. "Only that is which feels itself to be," he says in *Hellas*, and now at the conclusion of *Mont Blanc*, he returns to that of which he is sure. Philosophically considered, he can be certain only of his perception. The mountain itself cannot exist independent of thought:

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,  
If to the human mind's imaginings  
Silence and solitude were vacancy?<sup>28</sup>

In moments of silence and solitude is anything left of the "clear universe of things"? "I confess that I am one of those who are unable to refuse my assent to the conclusions of those philosophers who assert that nothing exists but as it is perceived,"<sup>29</sup> he says; and, furthermore, there is no distinction of kind, but only of degree, between thoughts which are called *real* or *external* and those which are called hallucinations, dreams, or the ideas of madness. "By considering all knowledge as bounded by perception, whose operations may be indefi-

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, ll 142-44. A similar interpretation is given by Salt, *A Shelley Primer*, p. 81. See also Dowden, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, II, 31.

<sup>29</sup> *Fragment On Life*.

nitely combined, we arrive at a conception of nature inexpressibly more magnificent, simple, and true than accords with the ordinary systems of complicated and partial consideration. Nor does a contemplation of the universe, in this comprehensive and synthetical view, exclude the subtlest analysis of its modifications and parts."<sup>10</sup>

Shelley has here what may seem pretty close to a solipsistic universe, made up of the content of his mind at any given moment. But this is not all. When living in Keswick in 1812 he had borrowed a volume of Berkeley which had a marginal note attributed to Charles Lloyd: "Mind cannot create; it can only perceive." This metaphysical notion appealed to him greatly at the time; he used it later in the fragment *On Life* in trying to prove the non-existence of an intelligent first cause of the universe, and repeated it with approval in a letter to Leigh Hunt in 1819. There is, he says in the before-named essay, a world of *things* whose relations remain unchanged, whether we say all is spirit (as he did in *Queen Mab*) or, as he now says, that the basis of things, whatever it is, cannot be mind. This dim world of "things" which is unknowable had chiefly a speculative interest for him, and his approval of the phrase attributed to Lloyd derived from his desire to prove the impossibility of an intelligent creator. "As if the cause of life could think and live," says Cythna. But this metaphysical question neither aids nor injures our thesis that mind is artistically creative; nor does it contradict the statements in the *Defense* and elsewhere that imagination is

<sup>10</sup> "Mind," *Speculations on Metaphysics*.

the creator of language and the parent of all knowledge. We find in the account of the sailing around Lake Geneva a very interesting statement of what Shelley thought of the creative powers of the artist's mind. Surrounded by the scenes which it had so wonderfully peopled, Shelley says he had all day been reading *Julie*:

. . . an overflowing of sublimest genius and more than human sensibility. Meillerie, the castle of Chillon, Clarens, the mountains of La Valais and Savoy, present themselves to the imagination as monuments of things that were once familiar, and of beings that were once dear to it. *They were created indeed by one mind, but a mind so powerfully bright as to cast a shade of falsehood on the records that are called reality.*

## IX

In the mature Shelley we find alternating moods. One is skeptical, when he doubts the existence of the familiar external world,

which seems to be  
But is not:—or is but quaint mockery  
Of all we would believe.<sup>81</sup>

This skepticism is stated also in the conclusion to the *Sensitive Plant*, but with something added:

Whether the Sensitive Plant, or that  
Which within its boughs like a Spirit sat,  
Ere its outward form had known decay,  
Now felt this change, I cannot say.

Whether that Lady's gentle mind,  
No longer with the form combined  
Which scattered love, as stars do light,  
Found sadness, where it left delight,

<sup>81</sup> *Letter to Maria Gisborne*, 154-58.

I dare not guess, but in this life  
Of error, ignorance, and strife,  
Where nothing is, but all things seem  
And we the shadows of the dream,

It is a modest creed, and yet  
Pleasant if one considers it,  
To own that death itself must be,  
Like all the rest, a mockery.

That garden sweet, that lady fair,  
And all sweet shapes and odours there,  
In truth have never passed away  
'Tis we, 'tis ours, are changed; not they

For love, and beauty, and delight,  
There is no death nor change. their might  
Exceeds our organs, which endure  
No light, being themselves obscure

In the last two stanzas we find the second mood, the optimistic faith in a world of ideal reality which is not subjective and which does not depend upon perception. Shelley's idealistic universe was now built up; when not despondent he celebrates in his poetry this world of ideas which is ruled by beauty and love. "Thought is the ultimate reality which contains spirits and ideas and dreams,"<sup>82</sup> says Leslie Stephen, referring somewhat contemptuously to a passage in *Prometheus*, "if, rather, it is not simpler to say that everything is a dream." Shelley found it difficult, it is true, to keep his ideal world objective, and sometimes he discovered that what he had believed to be a reality had indeed been only a dream. "Yet who is there," he asks, "that will not pursue phan-

<sup>82</sup> Stephen, "Hours in a Library," *Cornhill Magazine*, XXXIX, 296.

toms, spend his choicest hours in hunting after dreams, and wake only to perceive his error and regret that death is so near?" And this made up much of his life. He more than once loved an idea in his own mind which he discovered had no other existence. His adolescent experience with his young cousin is typical of his relations with women, and even with some men:

"I loved a being, an idea in my own mind," he wrote to Hogg,<sup>88</sup> "which had no real existence. I concreted this abstract of perfection, I annexed this fictitious quality to the idea presented by a *name*. the being, whom this name signified, was by no means worthy of this. . . . I love a being; the being whom I loved, is not what she was; consequently, as love appertains to mind and not body, she exists no longer." More accurately, the person who still exists is not the being whom he loved. He is filled with regret to discover that she never existed but in his mind.

Compare the above juvenile effusion with the following, written three weeks before his death. The *Epipsychidion* I cannot look at, the person whom it celebrates was a cloud instead of a Juno; and poor Ixion starts from the centaur that was the offspring of his embrace."<sup>84</sup> The previous autumn he had written that this poem was "a mystery; as to real flesh and blood, you know that I do not deal in those articles; you might as well go to a gin-shop for a leg of mutton, as expect anything human or earthly from me."<sup>85</sup>

<sup>88</sup> June 2, 1811.

<sup>84</sup> "To John Gisborne," June 18, 1822

<sup>85</sup> To the same, October 22, 1821.



Usually he is quite aware of what he is doing (although the foregoing statement is partly playful) and of what his relationship is toward the mundane world. He confesses that he is always in love with some ideal of perfection or other, and that his error, as the Poet's in *Alastor*, "consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal."<sup>29</sup>

This conscious rejection of "real flesh and blood" and the dwelling in a mental world where time and space are not has had a striking effect upon much of Shelley's poetry. Shelley, like the Fairy Mab, had in his empire fleeting visions as well as the records of sense impression. The fact that Ahasuerus was merely a phantom "Of human error's dense and purblind faith," made him none the less real; the God of Creation, though a phantom too, is no less powerful or cruel for that: and Jupiter, though he is merely a phantom in the mind of Prometheus (i.e., in the mind of man), is not therefore less fearful.

Philosophically Shelley believed that the line of demarcation between sensation and ideation was difficult to place; actually we know it was so for him; and hence in the *Epipsychidion* Emilia is sometimes mortal, and sometimes she is the spirit of Intellectual Beauty. Laon, in the *Revolt of Islam* says that his song

*Peopled with thoughts* the boundless universe,  
A mighty congregation, which were strong  
Whene'er they trod the darkness to disperse  
The cloud of that unutterable curse

<sup>29</sup> To the same, June 18, 1822.

Which clings upon mankind:—All things became  
 Slaves to my holy and heroic verse,  
 Earth, sea and sky, the planets, life and fame  
 And fate, or whate'er else binds the world's wondrous frame.

—*Canto II, xxx.*

Thoughts are the great reality and thought compels, more than that, *formulates* the dim chaos of things. He will not say mind creates *things*, for that involves him in the impossible problem of first cause. Man's part in creation is limited to getting into contact with the good and the beautiful—the true world of archetypal ideas, and here imagination is the only guide.

X

Traces of Shelley's early Necessarianism act as a sort of balance wheel upon his too enthusiastic faith in the regenerative power of mind. In a previous chapter there is mention of his impartial enthusiasm for a universe which was a perfect and unalterable mechanism, and his celebrating of man's power to drive out tyrants and other forms of evil. In his later works he also speaks of an inexorable necessity. In a note to *Hellas* he says, anent a former servant of Byron's who, though timid, became an insurgent leader in the Greek Revolution: "It appears that circumstances make men what they are, and that we all contain the germs of a degree of degradation or greatness whose connection with our character is determined by events." The bearing of this determinism upon the problem of evil has been dealt with in the preceding chapter.

It was in moments of despondency that Shelley, like

everyone else, gave way to fatalistic utterances. But the incurable optimist, the perfectibilist, the moralist, could not rest satisfied with a philosophy of negation and passivity. Regeneration through the power of mind is the theme of most of his poems, and this is the text of the sermon delivered through Cythna in the harangue to the sailors. After describing the ills of their lives she says:

"This need not be; ye might arise, and *will*  
That gold should lose its power, and thrones their glory;  
That love, which none may bind, be free to fill  
The world, like light; and evil faith, grown hoary  
With crime, be quenched and die."

—*Canto VIII. xvi*

For the whole social structure, if not the physical, rests on frail opinion:

'and those who try may find  
How strong the chains are which our spirit bind;  
Brittle perchance as straw."<sup>37</sup>

If there is evil in our lives it is because we permit it, says the zealous Julian:

" . . . it is our will  
That thus enchains us to permitted ill—  
We might be otherwise—we might be all  
We dream of, happy, high, majestic.  
Where is the love, beauty, and truth we seek  
But in our mind? And if we were not weak  
Should we be less in deed than in desire?"

—170-76

Prometheus, too, is king over himself and rules the "torturing and conflicting throngs within." So when he has hoped,

till Hope creates  
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates, . . .

—Act IV, 473-74.

man will be just, gentle, and wise, though not passionless. He will be

. . . free from guilt or pain,  
Which were, for *his will made or suffered them*,  
Nor yet exempt, *though ruling them like slaves*,  
From chance, and death, and mutability,  
The clogs of that which else might oversoar  
The loftiest star of unascended heaven,  
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.

—Act III, IV, 196-204.

Chance and death and mutability yet will have occasional power over man, will act as a check upon his otherwise too exuberant will, though usually he will rule them.

## XI

The subjectivity of these quotations is significant, so far as an understanding of Shelley's world and his poetry are concerned. Love, beauty, truth, which we seek in the world of sense, exist only in the world of mind, the world of ideas. Whether they are subjective or objective Shelley is not always sure. Hume had taught him that we can only be certain of the subjective. Good and evil alike are perhaps only subjective. So the furies which tortured Prometheus, while presented objectively, he says are *within*. The Titan represents the mind of

man, and man's ills are largely within his mind, of his own making. Perhaps the entire universe is subjective. The temporal earth and all it holds is supported by the mind of man (Prometheus):

Mother, thy sons and thou  
Scorn him, *without whose all-enduring will*

. . . . .  
*Both they and thou had vanished, . . . . .*<sup>8</sup>

*Prometheus Unbound* is truly a psychological, a metaphysical, drama. We have there the struggle between the forces of good and evil in the mind of man. Man, as the poet said in *Queen Mab*, is gifted with all-subduing will; as Prometheus says, he is king over himself; man, "whose nature is its own divine control," can compel the elements "with adamantine stress"; "all things confess his strength"; love alone is superior to him.

The world which is revealed in this drama is the world of mind, the mind of one man as bounded by perception, or universal mind, of which every mind is the whole-containing part. In this mind, which is autonomous over itself, with power to create and to destroy, we have the great struggle. If we are to assume, as Mr. Clutton-Brock does, that Prometheus represents the good in humanity, and that Jupiter represents an ex-

<sup>88</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, I, 113-16. (Recall also the prose quotation given above: "Nothing exists but as it is perceived.") In the next verses Prometheus tells the invisible spirits of nature that he has preserved them from their all-conquering foe, and this is the dramatic representation of the struggle between the opposing principles of good and evil inherent in the mind (and in every atom of the universe); the termination being marked by the triumph of good.

ternal evil power, then we must conclude, as this critic does, that "Shelley's myth, of course, explains nothing." But such is not the case. We must remember Shelley's subjective philosophy; and we must remember the evidence of many lines which proves that good and evil are both *within* the mind of man, as these twin powers are inherent in every atom of the physical universe (if we can be sure that there is a physical universe). Prometheus is just such a whole-containing part. For the purposes of drama, Jupiter and the other characters are given objective representation apart from the figure of the Titan—yet they are within the mind of man—in your mind and in mine. Shelley is here depicting the struggle between good and evil in both its widest and its narrowest theater—the universal mind, and his own mind. Perhaps he had finally been driven by his fruitless efforts to reform the world, to follow the brutal advice of an early reviewer—to reform his own breast. If five or six persons, or as many millions, could profit by this introspective dramatization they would be welcome to it.

When Prometheus ceases to hate, hate, tyranny, evil, are exterminated. This is in no sense a passive drama in which the Titan merely waits until the predoomed hour arrives for his release. This passive aspect is partly due to the old machinery of the Greek myth which Shelley utilizes. That there may also be something of Shelley's early necessarian philosophy here cannot positively be denied, for, as has been noted above Shelley was not entirely subjective; he never forgot that there was an external something which influenced mind, al-

though it was mind's slave. Here, however, as Todhunter suggested, necessity has to do with the workings of mind, not with the mechanical forces of a material universe. The "retributive hour" is a dramatic device rather than either an element in the Greek myth or a survival from Shelley's early enthusiasm for the French materialists. For there must be an interval permitted between the recalling of the curse and the disappearance of evil in order to allow time for the development of the secondary theme, the growth of Love and the other virtues, Asia and her sisters.

Prometheus is not a passive sufferer. He is the rebel of heaven, to Shelley more splendid than Satan because more virtuous than his adversary. Mercury entreats him, "Let the will kneel within thy haughty heart"; he pleads with the haughty heart which gave to Jupiter his power—"all he has." Prometheus, who is still king over himself, wills to recall the curse; wills, after long struggle, to cast pride and hate out of his heart.

## XII

The utter disregard of time which we find in such poems as *Prometheus Unbound* and the *Revolt of Islam* is cited by practical-minded persons to show that Shelley had the most fleeting grasp of mundane facts. Many are as much confused as was Mahmud, and with him would exclaim,

"What meanest thou? thy words stream like a tempest  
Of dazzling mist within my brain—they shake  
The earth on which I stand and hang like night

On Heaven above me. What can they avail?  
They cast on all things surest, brightest best,  
Doubt, insecurity, astonishment."

And Shelley through Ahasuerus would answer,

"Thought

Alone, and its quick elements, Will, Passion,  
Reason, Imagination, cannot die;  
They are, what that which they regard appears,  
The stuff whence mutability can weave  
All that it hath dominion o'er, worlds, worms,  
Empires and superstitions What has thought  
To do with time, or place, or circumstance?"<sup>39</sup>

Thought is the imperishable reality, the real "stuff" out of which everything from worlds to worms is made; but time or place or circumstance have no reality.<sup>40</sup> In this mundane world of experience Shelley knew that no sudden regeneration of society was possible, and this he clearly states in his *Address to the Irish People*, and in his *Philosophical View of Reform*. In the Preface to the *Revolt of Islam* he said that he composed the poem in the belief that he could perceive a "slow, gradual, and silent change." But ages in this world are but a moment in the eternal world of ideas, or in the realm of poetry. The difference between corruption and regeneration is merely a thin veil: we are bound to our miseries with chains of straw. Yet, if it seems that he is plunging us into a topsy-turvy world where all our old standards fail us, he would remind us that we often take to be realities what are merely conventions, and the things before

<sup>39</sup> *Hellas*, 786-802.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Prescott, *The Poetic Mind*, chapter vii.



which we cringe are only phantoms of our disordered minds. A general clearing out of these hobgoblins is of the utmost necessity before we can know what nature is at all.

But, as has above been indicated, he was not wholly subjective, or wholly without pragmatic standards. Perhaps, as has also been said, his early enthusiasm for a universal mechanism functions here.

"I would fain  
Be what it is my destiny to be, . . ."

says Prometheus, thereby acknowledging that there *are* physical laws apart from individual mind, and that freedom lies in directing our wishes according to those laws. In his waiting for the destined hour of release Prometheus acknowledges that he is not omnipotent, though he is potent. As a newspaper squib has put it, though a man may be captain of his own soul, he ought to realize that there may be a colonel or a general about. But Shelley, the revolutionist, rarely doubted the possibility of acquiring freedom, and, though his pardlike spirit often felt weak, and, though almost as free as the wind, he sometimes feels chained and bowed, he often quotes Godwin's line, "Desire never fails to generate capacity." As he wrote to the "sister of his soul" at the age of twenty, ". . . my golden age will be when the present potency [of mind] will become omnipotence."

### XIII

The lack of sharp distinction between sensations and ideas, between the objective and the subjective, accounts for much of the utterly fantastic in Shelley's

poetry Jupiter, as a creation of Prometheus, within and yet objectively apart, is not one of the strangest. The invocation of Jupiter's ghost from a subregion of shadows is even stranger. For Earth says,

For know there are two worlds of life and death.  
 One that which thou beholdest: but the other  
 Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit  
 The shadows of all forms that think and live  
 Till death unite them and they part no more;  
 Dreams and the light imaginings of men,  
 And all that faith creates or love desires,  
 Terrible, sublime, and beautiful shapes.  
 There thou art, and dost hang, a writhing shade,  
 'Mid whirlwind-peopled mountains; all the Gods  
 Are there, and all the powers of nameless worlds,  
 Vast, sceptered phantoms; heroes, men, and beasts;  
 And Demogorgon, a tremendous gloom;  
 And he, the supreme Tyrant, on his throne  
 Of burning gold.

And from this duplicate shadow-world, a sort of dream world, perhaps the shadow of the shadow of ideal reality, Prometheus can call any shape he wishes. But, that evil may not again taint even his dream of himself, he bids the Phantom of Jupiter arise to curse its prototype.

Dreams can take definite shape, and can speak. Thus Panthea's dream in Act II, Scene i, says "Follow! Follow!" is visible to Panthea, then to Asia, and then passes again into the mind of Panthea. This is not ordinary magic, if we are justified in applying what he says in a note to *Hellas* to all these strange apparitions. He there says that in calling up Ahasuerus he is not representing the ordinary ghost. "I have preferred," he says, "to represent the Jew as disclaiming all pretension, or

even belief, in supernatural agency, and as tempting Mahmud to *that state of mind* in which ideas may be supposed to assume the force of sensations through the confusion of thought with the objects of thought, and the excess of passion animating the creations of imagination." This sort of natural magic anyone can exercise to some degree, if he has made himself master of the secret associations of another's thoughts. It must be confessed that it is often difficult in reading Shelley to determine where subtle psychology ends and where pure fancy begins.

Shelley's metaphysical speculations were never completely systematized, and one who seeks to make him out a consistent follower of any system can do so only by overlooking or ignoring many factors. But that there was a growth away from materialism, through pantheism, to a transcendentalism strongly marked by skepticism, seems very plain. Mrs. Shelley was of the opinion that had he lived he would have formulated a new system which would have harmonized the best in all philosophy,<sup>41</sup> but this is very unlikely. A year before his death he wrote to Medwin that metaphysics had ceased to concern him greatly. "My mind," he writes, "is at peace respecting nothing so much as the constitution and mysteries of the great system of things; my curiosity on this point never amounts to solicitude." But, as we see in the *Triumph of Life*, his interest in man and the moral problem continued to the end.

<sup>41</sup> In a letter to Peacock, January 26, 1819, Shelley himself wrote of such a project, which he would have undertaken had he been well. For he "considered poetry very subordinate to moral and political science."

## CHAPTER IV

### ART AS IMITATION AND ART AS CREATION

#### I

Obviously there are two points of view in regard to the relation between nature and art. According to one, art is imitation of nature. According to the other, the poet spontaneously spins out of his subconscious mind all the important factors of art, with little regard for the limitations of physical life. Shelley, even though he says art is imitation, and even though he was a born reformer, inclines strongly toward the spider type of artist. Closely connected with these two views of art are two others: is art communication between the artist and the public, or is it merely expression on the part of the artist? Shelley the moralist made several statements supporting the communication theory, while Shelley the unsuccessful reformer, and Shelley the reviled and ridiculed exile, speaks of himself as a bird singing in solitude to ease the pain of his full heart.

#### II

According to the imitation theory the poet is closely related to the facts of mundane life. Shelley had in his earlier years read Locke with great interest, and before Locke the French mechanists. While in his maturity he talks of the poetic powers that steal upon him unawares, and of the poet as being of a different nature from the

man, though both inhabit the same body, yet he says that the mind (though it may not consciously control the process) creates by *selection and combination* of the material which it has. Although there are several more-or-less serious references, both in the letters and in the poems, to innate ideas, and to recollections from a previous existence, the psychology learned from Locke left its mark. The life of sense is important to art, not only because of the material which it supplies, but also because of the dependence of thought and emotion upon sense life, and because it is upon sense life that the work of art depends for its meaning. "As to imitation, poetry is a mimetic art. It creates, but it creates by combination and representation. Poetical abstractions are beautiful and new, not because the portions of which they are composed had no previous existence in the mind of man or in nature, but because the whole produced by their combination has some intelligible and beautiful analogy with those sources of emotion and thought, and with the contemporary conclusion of them."<sup>1</sup> Some years earlier, when less under the classical influence, Shelley made a still stronger statement. "The most astonishing combinations of poetry, the subtlest deductions of logic and mathematics, are no other than combinations which the intellect makes of sensations according to its own laws."<sup>2</sup> A poet is one who can make "strange combinations out of common things."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*.

<sup>2</sup> "Mind," *Speculations on Metaphysics*, attributed to 1815

<sup>3</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*.

## III

Everyone, while having definite gifts and tendencies of his own, must be a product of the age in which he lives, must reflect the age, and must bear a definite relation to his contemporaries. All the writers of any particular age must bear a resemblance to each other, for they "cannot escape from subjection to a common influence which arises out of an infinite combination of circumstances belonging to the times in which they live; though each is in a degree the author of the very influence by which his being is thus pervaded."<sup>4</sup> The mind of everyone, as he said in *Mont Blanc*, both *renders* and *receives* fast influencings,

Holding an unremitting *interchange*<sup>5</sup>

With the clear universe of things around;

and, as he says in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, "A poet is the combined product of such *internal* powers as modify the nature of others; and of such *external* influences as excite and sustain his powers; he is not one but both."

The part which the clear universe of things plays in the poet's work is undoubtedly great, for not only does the material of poetry come from the world of sense experience, but the stimulus to create comes from the

<sup>4</sup> Preface to the *Revolt of Islam*.

<sup>5</sup> Wordsworth speaks of the poetic mind as the combination of sense impression and the inherent power of mind; these two powers maintain

A balance, an ennobling *interchange*

Of action from without and from within.

—*Prelude*, Book xiii.

external world also. A significant part of the external world is the public, whose contribution toward a work of art Shelley also believed to be very important. "It is impossible to compose," he wrote very shortly before his death, "except under the strong excitement of an assurance of finding sympathy in what you write. . . . Lord Byron is in this respect fortunate. He touched a chord to which a million hearts responded, and the coarse music which he produced to please them disciplined him to the perfection which he now approaches"<sup>6</sup> The disciplining effect of a public was lacking for Shelley, and, as the passage above clearly shows, he was keenly aware of it. Criticisms to the effect that Shelley formed his ideas of man and nature in a wholly capricious way would not perhaps have been possible if he, like Byron, had found a million readers. He would have been a different poet certainly, more homely, but it is not so certain that he would have been a better one. The positive gain would have been in an increase of self-confidence and the accompanying tranquillity—which Shelley felt that he lacked. From Wordsworth he had learned to regard tranquillity as an "attribute and accompaniment of power."

The spirit of the age in which they live affects all poets, said Shelley, and the study of the foremost writers of his age is quite apt to influence a poet's style. Every writer is subject both to the modes of thought and feeling which the events of his age have brought to view, and to the *forms* in which these ideas and emotions have been expressed. These factors will tend to produce a

<sup>6</sup> To John Gisborne, June 18, 1822

similarity in all the writers of a given period, but it cannot be said because of that similarity that Byron imitates Wordsworth any more than that Wordsworth imitates Byron. The spirit of one's genius is less affected than is the form in which that spirit expresses itself, for it is chiefly the form which is contributed by an age. The form is "the endowment of the age in which they live," but the spirit is "the uncommunicated lightning of their own mind."

There is a direct correspondence, Shelley thought, between the moral tone of an age and the quality of the poetry produced in that period. In periods of moral decadence the public mind occupied itself with trivialities and not with universal truths, and poetry in such times was lacking in elevation and in sympathy. Humor became wit, and comedy, instead of being of a universal nature, became corrupt and obscene. Yet even in an age when imagination was at a low ebb and when indulgence was substituted for intellectual pleasure, poetry was the source of all the true happiness which men were capable of feeling.

If Shelley had no public it was not because he did not try to find one. He believed, in his earlier years at least, that the power of communication is one of the most essential attributes of poetry, and he tried to learn the public mind so that he might establish contact with it. In the Preface to the *Revolt of Islam* he says: "How far I shall be found to possess that more essential attribute to poetry, the power of awakening in others sensations like those which animate my own bosom, is that which, to speak sincerely, I know not; and which, with



an acquiescent and contented spirit, I expect to be taught by the effect which I shall produce upon those whom I now address." In 1821 he says, in a letter to Ollier, "I write what I write chiefly to enquire, by the reception which my writings meet with, how far I am fit for so great a task or not." With the court of public opinion, he thought, rests the decision whether or not one is a poet; not with contemporary opinion, which often confuses its opinions of the man with its estimate of his poetry, but with posterity: In 1821 he wrote: "Whether or no I am a poet is removed from the present time to the hour when posterity shall assemble; but the court is a very severe one, and I fear that the verdict will be 'Guilty—death!'" That he never did discover what the public mind was, he confesses in a letter to Horace Smith: "I am glad that you liked *Adonais*, and particularly that you did not think it metaphysical, which I was afraid it was. I was resolved to pay some tribute of sympathy to the unhonoured dead, but I wrote, as usual, with a total ignorance of the effect that I should produce."

Shelley's avowed purpose in writing poetry was to produce "something wholly new, and relative to the age, and yet surpassingly beautiful." Most critics now agree that he succeeded in this tripartite aim. But it is easier for us to see that he was relative to the age in which he lived than it was for his contemporaries. He belonged to a small group of radicals who, though not isolated from the current of thought, pitted themselves against the intense conservatism of a dull age; consequently he encountered in his lifetime little besides censure and abuse. We have only to recall the themes of such poems as

*Swellfoot the Tyrant*, the *Mask of Anarchy*, the *Revolt of Islam*, *Hellas*, and practically all of the short poems of 1819 to see how preoccupied Shelley was with the social milieu of the early nineteenth century.

Shelley's greatest efforts to represent the mundane world are to be found in his dramas. The scenes in *Charles the First* are entirely objective, and many have commented that in *The Cenci* Shelley is at last upon solid ground. Interesting representations of the world of experience, more or less idealized, are to be found in all of the autobiographical poems. In *Julian and Maddalo* the portraits of Shelley and Byron are, according to most critics, very "true to life." Even the madman, according to some, is a representation of Shelley's suffering after the parting from Harriet.<sup>7</sup> Shelley's self-portraits as Laon, Lionel, Prince Athanase, and the "one frail form" of *Adonais* have long been known.

## IV

But Shelley's was the type of mind which inclines instinctively toward the ideal, and hence, while he recognized that the senses supplied the materials of beauty, he came to believe more and more that the power of mind, the imagination, was the important factor in art. In the *Defense* he distinguishes between reason and imagination. Both work with the materials supplied by sense, but only imagination has the power of making new combinations, or discovering new truth. Imagina-

<sup>7</sup> See Salt, "A Study of Shelley's Julian and Maddalo," *Shelley Society Papers*, I, 1, 325; Shore, "Shelley's 'Julian and Maddalo,'" *Gentlemen's Magazine*, 1887-82, pp. 329-42.

tion is the poetic faculty. By its power the artist creates what is new, yet also relative to the age—new, yet related to the world of sense. As Shelley was more and more driven in upon himself—the things of this world being nothing but disappointments—he found refuge in the transcendental philosophy, and solace in a perfect world of ideas governed by love and beauty. Sometimes this world was thought of as almost wholly within the mind, as in *Prometheus Unbound*; sometimes it existed apart from both mind and the world of things, as in the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, and cast its shadow here; in *The Zucca*, it was imagined as being apart from this low sphere, neither in heaven nor earth. Sometimes the poet confuses the various “worlds” or slips unconsciously from one to the other, or vainly hopes to find the eternal in the mortal, as in the *Epipsychidion*. Time and space do not exist; human nature is metamorphosed in what seems a moment, and the universe is in an atom.

Shelley's tendency to idealize nature is as clearly shown in his *Skylark* as anywhere. Really, the actual bird which may have suggested the poem has little place in it. Shelley is interested in an “unbodied voice” which never was a bird. Yet there is some connection with the world of sense, for he asks,

What objects are the fountains  
Of thy happy strain?  
What fields, or waves, or mountains?  
What shapes of sky or plain?  
What love of thine own kind? what ignorance of pain?

External nature, the life of sense experience, pleasure and pain are sources of song, and often the saddest ex-

periences and thoughts produce the sweetest music. Yet this unbodied voice that sings from the ideal world, or near it, must surpass in joy anything mortal. Could the poet learn half this gladness he could utter such harmonious madness that the world would be forced to listen, as it never listened to Shelley in his lifetime. For most readers prefer the homely, not the ethereal. Even for our time Burroughs probably expressed the sentiment of the majority when he said he preferred Wordsworth's lark, which joined the kindred points of heaven and home, to Shelley's idealization. His story of the American tourist who went about English fields with Shelley's poem as a guide to the lark's song, and who reported that he found no lark, offers one of the most interesting commentaries ever made on Shelley as a nature poet.<sup>8</sup>

Another interesting commentary on Shelley and his relation to mundane facts has been made by one of the best-known students of Keats. Shelley's *Adonais*, says this critic, is unsurpassed as an utterance of abstract pity and indignation; "its strain of transcendental consolation for mortal ears contains the most lucid exposition of his philosophy. But of Keats as he actually lived the elegy presents no feature, while the general impression it conveys of his character and fate is erroneous."<sup>9</sup> Shelley wrote his poem from scant data, and had he possessed the particulars which Gisborne later sent him, his teeming imagination would have been so painfully stim-

<sup>8</sup> Burroughs, "Birds of the Poets," *Scribner's Monthly*, VI, 563.

<sup>9</sup> Colvin, *Keats*, "E.M.L. Series," 1887, p. 207; cf. Dowden, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, II, 417.

ulated that the elegiac sentiment, now so successfully expressed in the poem, would have been destroyed, as he says: "The enthusiasm of the imagination would have overpowered the sentiment."<sup>10</sup> The sentiment inspired by the contemplation of the untimely and sudden withdrawal of a noble spirit, Shelley would have agreed, is the valuable part of the poem, "poetry having nothing to do with the invention of facts."<sup>11</sup>

These statements must be disconcerting to the realists who hold that good art imitates by holding the mirror up to nature. But Shelley thought that the truth (which is ideal) can be seen only in the imaginative mirror which distorts the facts of nature. Burroughs was himself enough of a poet to recognize that the truth of poetry is of an ideal character. If one knows how to read the poets, he says, they are the best natural historians. But they translate the facts largely and freely. A celebrated lady once said to Turner, "I confess I cannot see in nature what you do." "Ah, Madam," said the complacent artist, "don't you wish you could!"<sup>12</sup>

# V

As Shelley met with continued rebuffs from the public he turned more and more away from the world of facts to the world of ideas, and from the communication theory to that of expression. *Prometheus Unbound*, he says, is not an imitation of anything, but is in "the mer-

<sup>10</sup> To John Gisborne, June 16, 1821.

<sup>11</sup> To Mary, August 11, 1821.

<sup>12</sup> John Burroughs, "Birds of the English Poets," *Scribner's Monthly*, VI, 569.

est spirit of ideal poetry," and it was never intended for more than "five or six persons."<sup>13</sup> Shelley, like Prometheus, would retire with those few whose care had made life sweet to remember, to the beautiful cave, and there make "Strange combinations out of common things," search for hidden thoughts in their unexhausted spirits, weave new and divine harmonies where there can be no discord. There should come the almost unheard echoes of love from the human world, pity's murmured pain, music, itself an echo of the heart, and all "That tempers and improves man's life, now free." And he would be visited by lovely apparitions, the immortal progeny of the arts, made bright from "the embrace of beauty," which, through the mind, is the source of reality. These arts are the intimations of the perfection which man shall attain, and mediators of love, shapes that grow more fair and soft as man grows wiser and kinder, and as error is revealed, veil by veil.<sup>14</sup>

This is the world which more and more occupied Shelley. All the elements of his personality inclined toward it; the vicissitudes of his life drove him away from the world of men, though he remained to the last deeply interested in them and their affairs, as *Hellas*, the *Ode to Naples*, the *Ode to Liberty*, and the *Mask of Anarchy* sufficiently attest. "I have employed my poetical compositions and publications," he says in a canceled passage of the Preface to *Adonais*, "simply as the instruments of that sympathy between myself and others which the

<sup>13</sup> To Medwin, July 20, 1820, and to John Gisborne, April 10, 1822.

<sup>14</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, Act III, Scene' iii, 30-63

ardent and unbounded love I cherished for my kind incited me to acquire." Such interest as *Hellas* may have derives solely, he says, "from the intense sympathy which the Author feels with the cause he would celebrate." But this vain sympathy, his frustrated moralism, and his lack of patience, made him turn away from representations of the mundane world toward creations like the *Witch of Atlas* and the *Triumph of Life*.

"It is the business of the Poet," he wrote in the Preface to the *Revolt of Islam*, "to communicate to others the pleasure and the enthusiasm arising out of those images and feelings in the vivid presence of which within his own mind consists at once his inspiration and reward." Even in 1817, then, he was arming himself against failure. Though he says it is the poet's business to communicate the content of his mind, yet, fearing there will be no other reward for him, he says that the pleasure and enthusiasm within his own mind is his reward as well as his inspiration. A few months later, perhaps thinking of his latest failure to win the public, he wrote from Italy, "My business is to relate my own sensations, and not to attempt to inspire others with them."<sup>15</sup> The following year he was ready to take upon himself much of the blame for his failure to interest the public. "The ill account you give of the success of my poetical attempts," he wrote to his publishers, "sufficiently accounts for your silence; but I believe that the truth is, I write less for the public than for myself."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> To Peacock, November 7, 1818

<sup>16</sup> To C. J. Ollier, September 6, 1819.

The notable exception to this tendency toward expressionism and subjective idealism, is of course, *The Cenci*. Here he made a great effort to deal with the mundane world of fact. His former works had been "dreams of what ought to be, or may be." The drama which he now presented was a sad reality. There is no effort to teach anything, but only to represent that which has been.<sup>17</sup> And when the didactic purpose is abandoned, it is to be expected that there will no longer be any stress upon the communication theory. Whether *The Cenci* represents "reality" or not is much disputed, and even among critics of our day opinions vary as to Shelley's success in creating real characters, particularly as to Count Cenci. One critic finds him a monster, "but he is a monster such as we know and feel has been spawned from the mire of the actual world."<sup>18</sup> Another says that Shelley could not imagine a character distinct from his own: he must either reproduce himself or create an abstraction; Count Cenci is an abstraction.<sup>19</sup>

## VI

From his earliest youth there was a leaning toward mysticism in Shelley. His childish interest in magic and in the marvelous are illustrations of it, and though this side of his character was for a time almost submerged in his worship of a mechanized and rationalized universe, yet reliance upon his feelings and upon inner promptings were mystical traits that endured. His faith in mankind

<sup>17</sup> Dedication to Leigh Hunt, Esq.

<sup>18</sup> Todhunter, *Shelley A Study*, p. 121.

<sup>19</sup> Sweet, *Shelley Society Papers*, I, No. 1, 291.



and his hope for the future were, although affected by occasional taints of skepticism, lasting mystical, rather than rational, traits. It is true that there are in Shelley's letters and poems strictures against faith, "the obscene worm"; but these are references to faith in what Shelley thought to be theological superstitions. Faith in politics and hope for the future he commends. "Hope, as Coleridge says, is a solemn duty, which we owe alike to ourselves and to the world."<sup>20</sup> He trusted so much to his feelings that the opinion of the world "could not impeach their credibility."<sup>21</sup> "There are points on which reasoning is insufficient to convince the mind," he wrote to Hogg.<sup>22</sup> Reason itself is "only as assemblage of our better feelings—passion considered under a peculiar mode of its operation."<sup>23</sup> What the heart and head are unanimous in approving we need never doubt.<sup>24</sup> The fact that reason does not confirm a notion does not disprove it. Often the feeling that it is so may constitute the strongest proof. Our inextinguishable thirst for immortality is the strongest and only presumption that eternity is the inheritance of every thinking being.<sup>25</sup>

Shelley's experiments with the life of reason were not encouraging in their results; reason as a factor in art he seems never to have considered with favor be-

<sup>20</sup> To Mrs. Gisborne, October 13, 1819.

<sup>21</sup> To Elizabeth Hitchener, February 3, 1812.

<sup>22</sup> May 13, 1811.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, February 7, 1813.

<sup>24</sup> To Elizabeth Hitchener, April 29, 1812.

<sup>25</sup> Note 2, *Hellas*. However, as said elsewhere in this essay, his faith, after repeated failures, was at last quite narrowly circumscribed by skepticism; reduced practically to a subjective field.

cause of that obvious didacticism which was his "abhorrence," but into which he nevertheless fell, and not infrequently. In the *Defense of Poetry* reason is given sn all place. It is a mere mechanical process which must wait upon imagination. Reason has to do with the relations which one thought bears to another; imagination is "mind acting upon those thoughts as to color them *with its own light*, and composing from them as from elements, other thoughts each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity." Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known, it is analytic; imagination is the perception of values, it is synthetic. A reaction against the psychology of Locke appears in the comparisons between man and the lyre. The impressions driven over the mind, both from without and from within, produce ever changing melody, as the wind does in the strings of the lyre, but there is a synthetic power within the mind which the lyre does not have, a power of accommodation among those impressions, and a power of adjustment to their external source. The result is not melody merely, but harmony also. With this process reason apparently has nothing to do. In fact, Shelley inclines strongly to the Greek idea of poetic madness—that one cannot make poetry until he has divested himself of reason.

What a wonderful passage there is in the *Phaedrus*,<sup>20</sup> the beginning, I think, of one of the speeches of Socrates—in praise

<sup>20</sup> "There are several kinds," says Socrates, "of poetic madness. That which proceeds from the Muses taking possession of a tender and unoccupied soul, awakening, and bacchically inspiring it toward songs and other poetry, adorning myriads of ancient deeds, instructs succeeding generations, but he who, without this madness from the Muses, ap-

of poetic madness, and in definition of what poetry is, and how a man becomes a poet. Every man who lives in this age and desires to write poetry, ought, as a preservative against the false and narrow systems of criticism which every poetical empiric vents, to impress himself with this sentence, if he would be numbered among those to whom apply this proud though sublime expression of Tasso: *Non c'è in mondo chi merita nome di creatore, che Dio ed il Poeta*.<sup>27</sup>

The mystical and irrational in poetry and poets impressed Shelley so much that in 1821 he wrote: "The poet and the man are two different natures; though they exist together, they may be unconscious of each other, and incapable of deciding on each other's powers and efforts by any reflex act."<sup>28</sup> Byron held a similar view, saying that poetry is a distinct faculty of the soul, having no more to do with the everyday individual than the inspiration of the Pythianess when removed from her tripod.<sup>29</sup>

At least a partial explanation of this sense of dual personality has been furnished by the psychologists. The "poet," they would say, represents the side of con-

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proaches the poetical gates, having persuaded himself that by art alone he may become sufficiently a poet, will find in the end his own imperfection, and see the poetry of his cold prudence vanish into nothingness before the light of that which has sprung from divine insanity" (*Platonis Phaedrus*, p. 245a. Peacock's note).

<sup>27</sup> To Peacock, August 16, 1818

<sup>28</sup> To John and Maria Gisborne, July 19, 1821.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted by Medwin, *Life of Shelley*, II, 145. Medwin held the same belief. Mr. Barnefield cites dissociation as a significant characteristic of the Androgyne, and Mr. Carpenter mentions Byron's name with Shelley's in discussing the feminine traits of genius. See Carpenter and Barnefield, *Psychology of the Poet Shelley*.

sciousness which functions in associative, undirected thought; in dreams, either waking or in sleep. The "man" represents the practical side of mind: directed, purposive thought. Since the associative thinking is not bound by the social conventions, or even by time and space, it seems discrete from the purposive processes, and hence is not looked upon as rational; is even regarded as a kind of madness. Since it comes without effort and unbidden, the poet easily believes himself inspired or divinely possessed. As Professor Prescott says, the results of this spontaneous thought, coming from the subconscious or unconscious mind, draw upon the whole store of past experience—upon much more than is available for directed thought—and hence its results may with some justice be regarded as more reliable and true than the results of the reasoned processes. There must have been some instinctive recognition of this among the ancients who regarded poets as divinely inspired, and as creators.

The proud though sublime opinion of Tasso was also Shelley's. Poets, he says, were, in the earlier epochs of the world, called legislators and prophets. The poet is both of these, for he not only beholds the present intensely and as it is, and discovers the laws according to which things ought to be governed, but he sees the future in the present. He participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one. So Lionel, when he is about to be thrust into prison, looks beyond the murky pile, and through the crowd around him:

he did espy

What poets know and prophecy.

This is the work of imagination, the poetic faculty. Imagination created language and all the arts. Poets are legislators and teachers because they are able to perceive the beautiful and the true; among men they first obtain that incomplete apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion.

Shelley, like the ancient rhapsodists, often felt that he was possessed or inspired, and that his words had some prophetic power. This was true in his earlier poems as well as in the later. To Godwin he says that the *Revolt of Islam* "was produced by a series of thoughts which filled my mind with unbounded and sustained enthusiasm. I felt the precariousness of my life . . . Much of what the volume contains was written with the same feeling, as real; though not so prophetic, as the communications of a dying man."<sup>30</sup> The characters in the poem are likewise divinely sustained. The paintings which displayed the Spirit's history on the jasper walls of the great hall were inspired. They formed

A tale of passionate change, divinely taught,  
Which, in their winged dance, unconscious Genii wrought

In a canceled fragment of the *Ode to Heaven* Shelley describes himself as sinking under a fierce control:

Down through the lampless deep of song  
I am drawn and driven along.

The *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* was composed, he wrote to Hunt, under the influence of feelings which agitated him even to tears. In the *Ode to Liberty*, as we have noted in the preceding chapter, the poet tells us

<sup>30</sup> December 11, 1817.

that he is merely recording a voice out of the deep, though it must be admitted that the poet's own passionate invocations to liberty are not in character with the passively recording voice. The oracular, inspired voice is also described in the *Ode to Naples*:

Louder and louder, gathering round, there wandered  
Over the oracular words and divine sea  
Prophesyings which grew articulate—  
They seize me—I must speak them!—be they fate!

This spontaneous poetry—this “overflowing of the soul”—has a reality and truth not derived from imitation of mundane objects or actions. The things of this world are even mocked, put to scorn by the divine creations of art. A slavish imitation of the external forms of nature indeed would not be art. It would hardly be worth attempting, for as a copy of a copy, or the shadow of a shadow, to use the Platonic phraseology, it could have little value. But Shelley's idealism here led him to a higher and truer opinion of art than that expressed by his master in the tenth book of the *Republic*. For to the mature Shelley, art was not copying mundane forms, but imitation of the infinite and archetypal forms, so far as imagination was able to apprehend them. In so far as art was successful it was superior to life, just as the ideal is superior to the temporal. But mere attempts to copy the forms of nature as nearly as possible had probably been a step in the history of art. In sculpture, for instance, the first step was mimicry; but when man became master of the art, he produced forms more perfect and far more beautiful than any in nature. Partially, at

least, man's imagination succeeded in penetrating the veil of appearances;

And human hands first mimicked and then mocked,  
With molded limbs more lovely than its own  
The human form, till marble grew divine; . . .<sup>31</sup>

and music lifted up the spirit and freed it from mortal care. This superiority to life was the work of "harmonious mind."

Whether mind was thought of as divinely directed or as a self-directing creative force, we know that from the time of *Julian and Maddalo* Shelley attributed great power to it. In the passage from *Prometheus* (Act III, Scene iii, lines 49-56) referred to previously, we are told that the mind, infused with strength from the embrace of beauty, gives reality to the phantoms of sense which throng it; and even the forms of art, which are among the phantoms, derive their reality from the mind of the beholder.<sup>32</sup>

In a letter to Peacock, Shelley describes Raphael's St. Cecilia as "in another and higher style; you forget that it is a picture as you look at it; and yet it is most unlike any of those things which we call reality. It is of the inspired and ideal kind, and seems to have been conceived and executed in a similar state of feeling to that which produced among the ancients those perfect specimens of poetry and sculpture which are the baffling

<sup>31</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, Act. II, Scene iv, ll. 80-82.

<sup>32</sup> For an amusing comment on these "absolutely and intrinsically unintelligible" lines, see the review of *Prometheus Unbound* in the *Quarterly Review* for October, 1821.

models of succeeding generations. There is a unity and a perfection in it of an incommunicable kind."<sup>33</sup>

Although so much has been said about an occult external force, most of it is figurative. Usually Shelley regarded his own mind as the source and fountain of his poetry. Thus, in the *Letter to Maria Gisborne* he recalls her listening to some interrupted flow

Of visionary rhyme,—in joy and pain  
Struck from the inmost fountains of my brain.  
With little skill perhaps

—107-70

When his intuition was complete it was as good as expressed. He did not, as a modern aesthete, identify intuition and expression; in fact the subtleties which have grown about the term "expression" were unknown to him, but the following extract shows how close he came to the doctrine: "I doubt about *Charles the First*; but, if I do write it, it shall be the birth of severe and high feelings . . . and, when once I see and feel that I can write it, it is already written."<sup>34</sup>

All of his spontaneous work was done in moments of enthusiasm. *Hellas*, he says, was written without much care in one of those few moments of enthusiasm which in his last years seldom visited him, and which left him weak and in pain. Earlier in life he had been able to induce this mood. While his mind was actively

<sup>33</sup> To Peacock, November 9, 1818

<sup>34</sup> To Olher, February 22, 1821. As we may conclude from a letter to Gisborne, April 10, 1822, *Charles the First* was never completed just because Shelley could not "seize on the conception of the subject as a whole."



engaged in writing or discussion it gained in strength while being exercised; subjects unclear at first assumed definite form, method growing out of the induced train of thought.<sup>35</sup>

But the recorded poem, the intuition rendered permanent, always suffered the general fate of creation; there was a falling away from perfection; the mind of the poet in creation "is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness"; but this power which "*arises from within*, like the colour of a flower" comes and departs and the conscious portion of our nature cannot control it; "when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet."<sup>36</sup>

## VII

Shelley has often been criticized for his imperfect meter, lapses in grammar, and bad rhymes. He was partially at least, aware of these defects. In the Preface to the *Revolt of Islam* he apologizes for leaving an Alexandrine in the middle of a stanza.<sup>37</sup> He tells us that the poem was composed in six months of unremitting ardor and enthusiasm. He says:

I have exercised a watchful and earnest criticism of my work as it grew under my hands. I would willingly have sent it forth to the world with that perfection which long labour and revision is said to bestow. But I found that, if I should gain something in

<sup>35</sup> To Godwin, February 24, 1812.

<sup>36</sup> *A Defense of Poetry*.

<sup>37</sup> Line 2537; see also line 2555.

exactness by this method, I might lose much of the newness and energy of imagery and language as it flowed fresh from my mind And although the mere composition occupied no more than six months, the thoughts thus arranged were slowly gathered in as many years.

His opinion of toilsome revision, and of the comparative value of the mundane and the ideal, is well, though flippantly, stated in the following stanza:

Wordsworth informs us he was nineteen years  
 Considering and retouching Peter Bell;  
 Watering his laurels with the killing tears  
 Of slow, dull care, so that their roots to Hell  
 Might pierce, and their wide branches blot the spheres  
 Of Heaven, with dewy leaves and flowers; this well  
 May be, for Heaven and Earth conspire to toil  
 The over-busy gardener's blundering toil.<sup>38</sup>

"I appeal to the greatest poets of the present day," he says in the *Defense*, "whether it is not an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labor and study. The toil and the delay recommended by the critics, can be justly interpreted to mean no more than a careful observation of the inspired moments, and an artificial connection of the spaces between their suggestions by the intertexture of conventional expressions; a necessity only imposed by the limitedness of the poetical faculty itself." Milton, he says, conceived *Paradise Lost* as a whole before he executed it in portions, and we have Milton's own statement that the muse "dictated" to him the "unpremeditated song." Let this be an answer to those who say there are fifty-six various readings

<sup>38</sup> *To Mary*, IV, *The Witch of Atlas*.

to the first line of *Orlando Furioso*. Poetry so produced would be as mosaic is to painting. "The instinct and intuition of the poetical faculty is still more observable in the plastic and pictorial arts; a great statue or picture grows under the power of the artist as a child in the mother's womb; and the very mind which directs the hands in formation, is incapable of accounting to itself for the origin, the gradations, or the media of the process."

Some interesting comments have been made on Shelley as an artist. Keats reproved him for his lack of "self-concentration, selfishness, perhaps," advising him to curb his magnanimity, to be "more of an artist," and to load every rift of his subject with ore. "The thought of such cold discipline must fall like cold chains upon you, who perhaps never sat with your wings furled for six months together."<sup>30</sup>

Shelley's statements given above regarding the poet's inspired moments and the necessity of connecting them with an "intertexture of conventional expressions," seem to be reflected in the utterances of Poe on the subject of the long poem. The American poet, so different in his own method of composition, left an opinion of Shelley which at some points is very shrewd:

If ever mortal "wreaked his thoughts upon expression" [says Poe] it was Shelley. If ever poet sang (as a bird sings) impulsively, earnestly, with utter abandonment, to himself solely, and for the mere joy of his own song, that poet was the author of the "Sensitive Plant." Of art—beyond that which is the inalienable instinct of genius—he either had little or disdained all. He really

<sup>30</sup> Keats to Shelley, August, 1820. *Works*, V, 188.

disdained that Rule which is the erration from Law, because his own soul was law in itself. His rhapsodies are but the rough notes, the stenographic memoranda of poems—memoranda which, because they were all-sufficient for his own intelligence, he cared not to be put to the trouble of transcribing in full for mankind.<sup>10</sup>

Wordsworth, on the other hand, declared, "Shelley is one of the best *artists* of us all: I mean in workmanship of style."<sup>11</sup> Among critics of the present, Mr. Gosse finds in Shelley's work, in spite of all his modernity and his revolutionary instinct, "the most classical technical perfection. No one among the moderns, has gone farther than he in the just attention to poetic form."<sup>12</sup>

But Shelley's true attitude is that stated in the Preface to the *Revolt of Islam* and again in *A Defense of Poetry*. The spontaneous song issuing from the inmost depths of the poet's mind is of incomparably greater worth than anything produced by careful toil, although the latter was necessary to connect the brief moments of inspiration. Yet, although the *Witch of Atlas* was one of his most spontaneous productions, he valued it much less than *Adonais*, which he praised as being "a highly wrought piece of art." So also he preferred *Prometheus Unbound* to *The Cenci*, although the former cost him infinitely more labor. Rather quaintly he says that he preferred *Prometheus*, just as a mother is partial toward the child which gives her the most trouble. That Shelley did have great difficulty with some of his poems we know from the accounts of his friends. Medwin tells that the

<sup>10</sup> *Poe Works*, edited by Stedman & Woodberry, VI, 317.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Wordsworth, *Memoirs*, II, 474.

<sup>12</sup> Gosse, "Shelley in 1892," *Questions at Issue*, p. 214.

MS of *Charles the First* was "lined and interlined and interworded, so as to render it almost illegible"; and like the MSS of Tasso's *Jerusalemme Liberata* in the library of Ferrara, his was larded with word on word until scarcely decipherable.<sup>43</sup> Medwin says he also saw printed copies of the *Revolt of Islam* and *Queen Mab* similarly interlined, and upon his objecting to such self-hypercriticism Shelley replied: "The source of poetry is native and involuntary, but requires severe labor in its development."

Trelawny tells about coming upon Shelley in a pine forest where he was writing verses on a guitar. Trelawny could make out only the first two lines. "It was a frightful scrawl; words smeared out with his finger, and one upon the other, over and over in tiers, and all run together is most 'admired disorder'; it might have been taken for a sketch of a marsh overgrown with bulrushes, and the blots for wild ducks." Upon Trelawny's remarking the resemblance to what self-conceited artists mistake for a manifestation of genius, Shelley is said to have replied:

When my brain gets heated with thought, it soon boils, and throws off images and words faster than I can skim them off. In the morning, when cooled down, out of the rude sketch as you justly call it, I shall attempt a drawing. If you ask me why I publish what few or none will care to read, it is that the spirits I have raised haunt me until they are sent to the devil of a printer. All authors are anxious to breech their bantlings.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Medwin, *Life of Shelley*, II, 163, 171-72.

<sup>44</sup> Trelawny, *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron*, 1858.

## CHAPTER V

### POETRY

#### I

All art is mimetic, according to Shelley; yet only in its crude stage does it attempt merely to reproduce the common forms of earth. Out of the stored-up materials of sense experience the imagination creates forms more perfect than any that were ever the work of nature. These perfect forms may be regarded as springing from the inmost depths of the artist's mind, or they may be thought of as communicated or dictated to the artist from the perfect and eternal world. In so far as the artist achieves success in his work, he has penetrated beyond the transient and imperfect world of appearances into an ideal and perfect world, and in his work he participates in the creative process, in the power of Deity. The artist often feels that he is a dedicated spirit, that he is the instrument of the Divine Will. His utterances often have a prophetic character; his concern is largely with ideas of a high moral seriousness. The sense of prophecy and the preoccupation with moral truth tend to lead the poet into didacticism. Yet the perception of truth, which is a good, is invariably pleasant, so poetry is always attended with pleasure.

While poetry and the other arts are mimetic, their aim is to produce an effect rather than to reproduce a thing, though this effect does not necessarily presuppose

an audience. The lyre when the wind passes over its strings produces an effect according to the laws of its own nature. Man, when subjected to external stimuli, responds to the irritation with an expression of pleasure or pain which bears a definite relation to that which produced it, but which is different in kind. A child at play will express its delight by its voice and movement, and each gesture will, in a way, be an image of that which produced it, yet different. After the cause has died away the child will seek to prolong its pleasure by prolonging in its voice and motions the duration of the effect. This desire to make the effect permanent was, so Shelley thought, the probable origin of language and of the various arts.

Poetry and the other arts are imitative, but the imitation is the result of desiring to prolong or make permanent an effect which something in nature, or in the relations between men, had made upon the observer. This desire for prolongation of pleasure may coincide with the desire for communication, or merely for expression. The basis of art is, in either case, emotional and not intellectual. Facts as such, while they may be of importance in history or philosophy, would be of no importance in art unless they had a definite emotional value. The marshaling of facts is the work of reason; the selection and combination of materials of sense so as to produce a unified and harmonious result is the work of the poetic faculty, imagination. This power inherent in the mind is able to make out of the materials which it has, forms approaching to ideal perfection, and hence

is genuinely creative.<sup>1</sup> Poetry and the other arts in their approximations to the perfect and enduring are thus concerned with the highest truth. When the veiled maid appeared to the Poet in *Alastor*, singing in tones "like the voice of his own soul "

Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme,  
And lofty hopes of divine liberty.

But the imaginative truths of poetry always have to be referred to the emotions in order to determine their validity. Consciously or not it is the satisfaction of an emotional craving which the artist is trying to achieve in a work of art, and when he has found it he recognizes it instantly by the pleasure which attends the representation. Shelley believed that the spark of divinity, the white radiance of eternity which was in everyone, and which could not be entirely obscured by the dome of many-colored glass, made all people aspire toward a more perfect world. Everyone has some imagination, some ability to find truth and beauty, and hence happiness, but poets have this faculty most highly developed. Men in a society find the passions and pleasures of life

<sup>1</sup> Shelley here was following Sidney. *Vide Apologie*. Sidney in turn had followed Aristotle in defining poetry as imitation whose purpose was to teach and delight. However, some think that when Sidney explains that those who "most properly do imitate . . . borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be, but range only, reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be," that he goes much further into the region of the ideal than Aristotle meant to go. Shelley without doubt agreed wholly with Sidney in this interpretation of the meaning of imitation. Like Sidney, he believed that the poet remade nature and man, creating things and characters superior to nature.



greatly enriched, and equality, diversity, unity, contrast, and mutual dependence, which are the principles determining their wills to action, also are the principles which "constitute pleasure in sensation, virtue in sentiment, beauty in art, truth in reasoning, and love in the intercourse of kind." Love of truth and beauty, hatred of falsehood and error are the underlying principles of society and of art alike. Poetry is the expression of the imagination; the imagination enables us to put ourselves in the place of others, to find what is good in them and to love it. Poetry develops the imagination as exercise develops a limb, and hence is the best socializing agent. Poets, as those having most imagination, are the discoverers of all knowledge, the pioneers in all fields of learning. As they are most sensitive to harmony and best able to produce it, they are the originators of laws, the lawgivers to the world. The arts, then, are in the very closest relationship to life, to morality, to knowledge, and can never become obsolete or useless, as Peacock contended they had already become.<sup>2</sup> They bridge the gap between the temporal and the infinite.

The stress which Shelley lays upon the emotional basis of art may not seem to be in accord with the conception of poetry as an art which discovers and expresses the highest truth, for emotion is commonly thought to interfere with the discovery of truth. But, as the mystics and transcendentalists have always done, Shelley relied (as we have already seen) very much upon his emotions and inner promptings. Instead of accepting the world's judgment, he had long been accustomed to trust to his

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, *The Four Ages of Poetry*.

feelings. And it is interesting to note that this statement and others of the same tenor were made even during the period when he was most engrossed with the cult of reason preached by Godwin and the Encyclopaedists. "Reason," he wrote to Hogg in February, 1813, "is only an assemblage of our better feelings—passion considered under a peculiar mode of its operation. . . ." He believed that all new truth came, a little at a time no doubt, through intuitive flashes, in sudden illuminations; and the mode of mind which apprehended these new relationships he called the imagination, the poetic faculty. The experience always brought a glow of intense pleasure, even though the background of fact had been tinged with melancholy.

## II

In all art there is a formalistic element which is of basic importance, and upon which the emotional reaction depends. In all forms of mimetic representation, in dancing, song, in the combinations of language, and in the plastic arts, there is a certain rhythm or order. In each of these classes of representation there is a particular order or rhythm from which the hearer or spectator receives an intenser and purer pleasure than from any other: "the sense of an approximation to this order has been called taste by modern writers." The gradations of diversity in order or rhythm are not perceptible except in those who are predominantly gifted in ability to approximate the beautiful. Those who are most able to perceive this relationship are poets, in the most universal sense of the word; "and the pleasure resulting from the

manner in which they express the influence of society or nature upon their own minds communicates itself to others, and gathers a sort of reduplication from the community."<sup>3</sup> Poets, being those who are best able to imagine and express the indestructible order of the universe, are for this reason the authors of language, of music, of the dance, architecture, sculpture, and painting.

One may ask why the poets have not been more systematic thinkers; why the poet's sense of form, proportion, and harmonious relationships does not extend itself into systems of thought. Shelley would, of course, have denied that the poets have borrowed their philosophical ideas from the systematic philosophers. On the contrary, he maintained that the philosophers, in so far as they have contributed new ideas or made new associations between ideas, have made their discoveries by means of the imagination, and hence are poets. Thus Plato and Bacon were poets; essentially there is no difference between a poet and a philosopher, and Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton were "philosophers of the very loftiest power." Perhaps if Shelley had been pressed he would have added that those whom we commonly called philosophers have, in addition to imagination, its colder and more prosy counterpart, reason, developed to a high degree. Though not hostile to reason, as Blake was, Shelley did not value it highly. Shelley's own intellectual powers have been questioned by many, though one of his less sympathetic critics, after many pages devoted

<sup>3</sup> *Defense of Poetry* The part played by the public in a work of art has already been discussed, it will be recalled, in the preceding chapter.

to Shelley's impulsiveness, confesses that "the peculiarity of his style is its intellectuality. . . . His language is minutely and acutely searching; at the dizziest height of meaning the keenness of words is greatest. . . . In the wildest ecstasies his self-anatomising intellect is equal to itself."<sup>1</sup> But in spite of his high intellectual powers and in spite of the high claims which Shelley made for poetry, it is not probable that he would ever have framed a coherent philosophical system. Mary Shelley's confident belief that, had he lived, he would have synthesized the best in the systems of Plato, Kant, Spinoza, etc., is of no value except as a testimonial of her affection. Though Shelley could apprehend and evaluate ideas, he had little patience for the "enumeration of quantities already known" and for the consideration of differences, with which reason has to deal, and with which systematic philosophers have to deal.

The harmonious expression of one's apperception of life, which has the possibility of communication, which gives pleasure, and which has been vitalized by its author's contact with his fellow-men, is, according to Shelley, poetry in its widest sense. "A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth." A poem differs from a story in that the story is a catalogue of facts related in time, place, circumstances, cause, and effect. The poem is the "creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the Creator, which is itself the image of all other minds." The story is of a given time and place, a

<sup>1</sup> Bagehot, *Literary Studies*, I, 125. Vide also Blackwood's, January, 1891, and Clutton-Brock, *Shelley*, p. 20.

combination of events which can never recur; the poem is universal and bears in itself "the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature." A story of particular facts obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful. By its copying of the details of external nature or of man's life it fails to discover the fundamental relationships or rhythms which have universal validity. The poem, on the other hand, is "a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted." The poet perceives the basic proportions and relationships under the chaotic appearances of life, and out of them makes a harmony which is in accord with the unchangeable forms of human nature and with the mind of the Creator.<sup>5</sup>

## III

As rhythm or order is fundamental in distinguishing beauty, it is logical that rhythm should be of primary importance in poetry, and that distinction should be made between measured and unmeasured language. Meter was produced, Shelley thought, by the observation of the regular mode of occurrence of harmony in the language of poetic minds, with the result that traditional forms of harmony were established. But it is not necessary that a poet accommodate his language to a traditional form, if the spirit of poetry, which is harmony, be

<sup>5</sup> What Shelley means by the Creator is uncertain; while disbelieving the story of creation, he sometimes falls into the conventional terminology. In *Prometheus*, mind, or imaginative foresight, with certain limitations, is the creator. Sometimes he speaks of Love as the ruling and creative power. Sometimes Beauty is the power which gives form and reality. See chapter vi.

preserved. The practice of writing in meter is to be preferred, though a poet must inevitably make innovations upon the forms used by his predecessors.

Shelley follows Sidney in declaring that the distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error. Like Sidney, too, he declares that certain philosophers and other prose writers were poets. "Plato was essentially a poet," he says in the *Defense*; "the truth and splendor of his imagining, and the melody of his language, are the most intense that it is possible to conceive. He rejected the measure of the epic, dramatic, and lyrical forms, because he sought to kindle a harmony in thoughts divested of shape and action, and he forbore to invent any regular plan of rhythm which would include, under determinate forms, the varied pauses of his style." Bacon was a poet too, and his language has "a sweet and majestic rhythm, which satisfies the sense, no less than the almost superhuman wisdom of his philosophy satisfies the intellect."<sup>6</sup> Although Plato is master of a rare and subtle logic, it is the "Pythian enthusiasm of poetry, melted by the splendor and harmony of his periods into one irresistible stream of musical impressions," which makes him a poet; his intuitions into all that can be the subject of human mind, rather than his reason. The poetry of Moses, Job, David, Solomon, and Isaiah had a great effect upon Jesus, whose own words are "instinct with the most vivid poetry." "All the authors of revolutions in opinion are not only necessarily poets, as they are inventors, nor even as their words

<sup>6</sup> A similar statement is to be found in Shelley's *Essays and Letters* (1840), I, 73.

unveil the permanent analogy of things by images which participate in the life of truth; but as their periods are harmonious and rhythmical, and contain in themselves the elements of verse; being the echo of the eternal music." Poetry reveals through concrete and rhythmical language hitherto unperceived relationships between the world of experience and that of truth. Imagination invents or discovers and synthesizes its elements into a harmony which is in accord with the eternal music.

Parts of a composition may be poetry, without the work as a whole being a poem. We may even regard a single sentence as poetry, though it occurs in the midst of others which are unassimilated—out of harmony with each other and with themselves. This small part of a composition may be the spontaneous work of imagination, while those surrounding it may be only the laborious result of unimpassioned effort. Even a single word may be "a spark of inextinguishable thought." For this reason all of the great historians, Herodotus, Plutarch, and Livy, were poets. Their method of work, demanding as it did too close an observance of particulars, prevented their developing the poetic faculty in its highest degree, but "by filling all the interstices of their subjects with living images," they made ample amends for their subjection.

#### IV

The manner in which poetry achieves its effect is impossible to apprehend. Since it is concerned with the permanent and universal, it must inevitably be conducive of virtue: but the mature Shelley (although we find

it in his poetry) says he had no faith in moral precept. Moral precepts are the result of reason, they are particular and local, of a time and place. A poet would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong in his poetry, for they could not have universal validity. A didactic purpose, he says, is injurious to poetry, and poets such as Euripides, Lucan, Tasso, and Spenser, who have frequently affected a moral aim, diminished the effect of their poetry in exact proportion to the degree "in which they compel us to advert to this moral purpose."<sup>7</sup> "Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it." Since genuine poetry is inevitably conducive to virtue, there need be no attempt made to avoid the representation of evil, for it is not the presence of the evil, or of the transient, which determines that a work is not poetry, but the *absence* of the universal, permanent, and harmonious. Poetry has the power to transform all things to loveliness, to subdue to union all irreconcilable things.

The effect of poetry upon the mind is mystical. As Shelley says of Bacon's majestic rhythm, "It is a strain which distends, and then bursts the circumference of the reader's mind, and pours itself forth together with it into the universal element with which it has perpetual sym-

<sup>7</sup> *The Defense*. See chapter i, in which a discrepancy between Shelley's theory and practice was pointed out. The criticism which Shelley makes of Euripides, Spenser, etc. has been aptly applied to Shelley himself: ". . . The purely polemical portions of his poems, those in which he puts forth his antagonism to tyrants and religions and custom in all its myriad forms, seem to me to degenerate at intervals into poor rhetoric" (John Addington Symonds, *Shelley* "E.M.L. Series," 1879); see also *Blackwood's* for June, 1819.



pathy." This sudden widening of the reader's mental horizon, we should note, corresponds exactly to the simplest mystical experience as it is described by William James.<sup>8</sup> The suddenly deepened meaning of a word or phrase, which at once opens new vistas to us and makes us exclaim, "I've heard that all my life, but never realized its full significance till now," is, according to James, a mystical experience. Other attributes of the mystical state, such as the feeling of elation or elevation, of moral exaltation and intellectual enlightenment, the sense of familiarity, all are recognizable in Shelley's words. The passivity of mind, and at least an approach to what Professor Bucke termed "cosmic consciousness," are also apparent. The evanescent visitations of thought and feeling which come to the poet, Shelley says, are like "the interpenetration of a diviner nature than our own; but its footsteps are like those of a wind over the sea, which the coming calm erases, and whose traces remain only, as on the wrinkled sand which paves it. This and corresponding conditions of being are experienced principally by those of the most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination; and the state of mind produced by them is at war with every base desire. The enthusiasm of virtue, love, patriotism, and friendship is essentially linked with such emotions; and whilst they last, self appears as what it is, an atom to a universe." The ineffability of the higher mystical state is, however, lacking.

<sup>8</sup> James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: Mysticism*. There is an interesting discussion of Shelley's mysticism in Carpenter and Barnefield, *The Psychology of the Poet Shelley*, pp. 106 ff.

Poetry has the power of awakening and enlarging the mind "by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar"; it reproduces in the mind of the reader that which it represents, and "the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have contemplated them as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists." The creations of art, bathed in the light of beauty, impress themselves upon the mind as embodiments of truth and harmony, and this feeling of harmony or love extends itself to include all with which it comes in contact. This spirit of harmony or love is the secret of morals as it is of art.

Besides the illuminating and expanding effect of poetry, it can be known by the feeling of pleasure with which it is always attended. "Poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure; all spirits upon which it falls open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight." Social corruption destroys sensibility to pleasure, but even in corrupt periods, poetry communicates all the pleasure which men are capable of receiving. It is still the light of life and the source of whatever there can be of the beautiful, generous, or true in a time of evil. By pleasure Shelley means the good which all sensitive and intelligent men seek and which they recognize and acquiesce in when it is found. There are two kinds of pleasure: one which banishes the importunity of the wants of our animal nature, giving men

security of life, dispersing the grosser delusions of superstition, and inducing such forbearance among men as may be consistent with personal advantage. But this sort of utility is transitory and particular; the durable and universal pleasure comes from whatever strengthens and purifies the affections, enlarges the imagination, and adds spirit to sense. The first sort of utility is the result of the calculating faculty, and while men pursue it the rich grow richer and the poor, poorer, while the vessel of state is driven between the Scylla of anarchy and the Charybdis of despotism. There is no lack of the wisdom which the calculating faculty is able to produce; we know principles which are much better than those which we practice. "But we let '*I dare not wait upon I would*, like the poor cat in the adage.' We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life; we have eaten more than we can digest." The mechanical arts have been assiduously cultivated while the imaginative arts have been allowed to languish, and as a result the inventions for abridging labor have only increased the curse of Adam. Poetry is the God, Shelley insisted, and self, or its visible incarnation, money, is the Mammon of the world. He believed that the world could yet be saved by the god Poetry. It is in periods when the materials of external life have been accumulated in excess of our power to assimilate them to the laws of our internal nature that the cultivation of poetry is most needed. These externals are the body of which imagination or poetry is the soul, and in

certain periods the body is permitted to become too unwieldy for the soul to manage.

Although the effect of poetry is pleasant, the pleasure may spring from the representation of sorrow, terror, anguish, or even despair. Melancholy is inseparable from the sweetest melody. While the highest type of poetry should excite profound meditation, the lesser may interest the affections, amuse the imagination, and thereby awaken "a certain ideal melancholy favorable to the reception of more important impressions." The composition of *Rosalind and Helen*, he says, is not calculated to excite profound meditation. It is not an attempt in the highest style of poetry. If it engages the affections of the reader, stirs his imagination and induces a feeling of "ideal melancholy," the reader will have experienced what the poet did in its composition.

The highest type of poetry, according to Shelley, is divine and not mortal. Not even the greatest poet can say, "I will compose poetry." He must wait for the invisible influence to brighten his imagination. No amount of labor and study can do more than fill the gaps between the moments of inspiration. The visitations arise unforseen and depart unbidden, but they delight beyond expression while they last. "Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds." Poets, as subject to divine inspiration, color with the hues of the ethereal world all that they touch, and thus reanimate in others the sleeping or cold images of a diviner world. Poetry thus immortalizes all that is best and most beautiful in the world; it arrests the "vanishing apparitions which haunt the interluna-

tions of life," and veiling them in language or in other form, sends them to communicate joy to persons with whom kindred spirits of beauty abide, kindred spirits which do not manifest themselves, because there is no "portal of expression" by means of which to escape from the caverns of the spirit into the universe of things. "Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man."

## V

The poetical faculty thus has a double function: it cannot only create new materials of knowledge, power, and pleasure, but it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange those materials according to a certain rhythm or order which may be called the beautiful and the good. This reproduction and arrangement, as stated earlier in the chapter, is the mimetic process of art; but it is more than imitative, because of the power residing in the mind which enables it to combine its materials into forms of such harmony and perfection that the objects of external nature are mocked, rather than mimicked. Poetry has the power to bring externals into tune with the universal harmony, for the poet is the first link in the chain which binds the world of men to that of the gods.<sup>9</sup>

The original element in poetry Shelley thought to be very large. In any class of mimetic representation there is that fundamental factor of order or rhythm which in the representation bears a relation to, but yet differs from, the order or rhythm of the action or thing which

<sup>9</sup> See *A Defense of Poetry* and Shelley's translation of the *Ion*

is represented. While we may suppose that the rhythmic factor in things in nature is of importance, yet when those things are imaginatively represented, the rhythm of the representation springs from the poet, and not from the external object or action. Even in primitive works of art, Shelley says, men "observe a certain order in their words and actions, *distinct from that of the objects and the impressions represented by them*, all expression being subject to the laws of that from which it proceeds."<sup>10</sup> Even the lyre responds to the wind or other stimulus according to the laws of its own nature, although it has not the power of adjustment and of synthesis that would enable it to make harmony as well as melody.

It is the fundamental factor of rhythm which makes translation of poetry impossible. In every poetical composition there is a close relationship between the rhythms of sound and those of thought. They are, indeed, inseparable, and the meaning and effect of the poem depend upon both. Facts, no doubt, can be translated into any language, but

Facts are not what we want to know in poetry, in history, in the lives of individual men, in satire, in panegyric. They are the mere divisions, the arbitrary points on which we hang, and to which we refer those delicate and evanescent hues of mind, which language delights and instructs us in precise proportion as it expresses. What is a translation of Homer into English? A person who is ignorant of Greek need only look at *Paradise Lost* or the tragedy of *Lear* translated into French to obtain an analogical conception of its worthless and miserable inadequacy.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *To a Lady*, spring, 1821. See the formless, prosy translations of Shelley's poems into French.

The language of poets has always affected a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound, without which it would not be poetry, and this sound rhythm is almost as necessary to the communication of its influence as are the words themselves. When an attempt is made to translate from one language to another, it is obvious that while fairly exact equivalents can be found for the words, the sound element of each word is changed, and the sound rhythm which resulted from the juxtaposition of the words in the verse must be utterly destroyed. "Hence the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of the poet. The plan must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower. . . ."<sup>12</sup> Translation, then, is impossible, first, because the interrelated rhythms of sound and sense cannot be reproduced in another language, and second, because the work of art must spring from an intuition, as the plant from the seed. Although Shelley did not say that every intuition is unique, his figure of the seed bears close resemblance to the theory of Benedetto Croce.<sup>13</sup>

Shelley's opinion of his own translations was not very high. Speaking of his English versions of the *Cyclops* and the *Symposium*, he says that he threw over their "perfect and glowing forms" the "grey veil" of his own words. Knowing a genuine translation was impossible, he attempted what was suggested above: that is,

<sup>12</sup> *A Defense of Poetry*,

<sup>13</sup> *Vide Aesthetic*, Ainslie's translation, p. 68.

he tried to get his mind into the condition in which he imagined the mind of the original author to have been when the poem was written, or he tried to think how the author would have composed in English. Thus he tried to figure to himself how Goethe would have written in English. Because each language has a genius of its own, the translator must choose stanzaic forms which are best suited, instead of attempting to reproduce the forms of the original.

## VI

The language of poets is "vitally metaphorical," that is, it marks relationships before unperceived and perpetuates that apprehension in words which become in time signs for portions or classes of thought, instead of pictures of integral thoughts. When this stage is succeeded by one of the stereotyped forms of speech, some new poet must arise to revitalize the language or it will become dead. In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself, being fresh and full of associations, is poetry. At such times language is poetry because it is imaginative, because the associations between existence and perception on the one hand, and between perception and expression on the other, are clearly marked. Grammarians and lexicographers follow the poets, classifying and cataloguing the creations of poetry. The grammatical forms as to moods of time and difference of person are of no value in the highest poetry.

Color, form, religious and civil habits of action, as well as language, are all instruments and materials of



poetry; in the *Revolt of Islam* the poet speaks of "Paintings, the poesy of mightiest thought," and the Witch. we are told, embroiders "pictured poesy" in her fountain-lighted cavern. But in a more restricted sense poetry expresses those arrangements of language, and especially metrical language, which are created by "that imperial faculty, whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man." The fact that poetry is particularly well expressed in language is due to the nature of language itself, which is "a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being and is susceptible of more various and delicate combinations than color, form, or motion, and is more plastic and obedient to the control of that faculty of which it is the creation. For language is arbitrarily produced by the imagination, and has relation to thoughts alone; but all other materials, instruments, and conditions of art, have relations among each other, which limit and interpose between conception and expression."<sup>14</sup> Language is as a mirror which reflects the light of imagination; the other media, because of their inherent qualities (what Aristotle called entelechies), are as clouds that enfeeble the light which they should communicate. It is because of the superiority of language as a medium of expression that poets have excelled in fame all other artists. Only founders of laws and of religions have rivaled poets in fame, and if one subtracts from the fame of the former a portion for gross flattery by the vulgar, and what belongs to them in their higher character of poets, little excess will remain.

<sup>14</sup> *A Defense of Poetry*

Language, because less refractory than other media, Shelley thought most suitable to poetry, and of all languages he held that English, because of its monosyllables, was the most musical. English also has that advantage found in some other languages, of double rhymes, and these are very effective, at least in comic poetry, as *Hudibras* and *Don Juan* sufficiently attest.

As to the vocabulary of his own poems, Shelley disclaims any system. Referring to *Prometheus* he said, "In poetry I have sought to avoid system and mannerism. I wish that those who excel me in genius would pursue the same plan."<sup>15</sup> In the Preface to *The Cenci*, he said that, except in the passages where strong passion was imaged, he had written rather carelessly, without over-fastidious or learned choice of words. "In this respect I entirely agree with those modern critics who assert that in order to move men to true sympathy we must use the familiar language of men, and that our great ancestors, the English poets, are the writers, a study of whom might incite us to do that for our own age which they have done for theirs. But it must be the real language of men in general, and not that of any particular class to whose society the writer happens to belong." This statement was understood by a contemporary review<sup>16</sup> to be a hit at "the exploded Wordsworthian heresy" that poetic language should be the language of daily life. A similar view may be taken of the statement in the Preface to the *Revolt of Islam*: "Nor have I permitted any system relating to mere words to divert the attention of the read-

<sup>15</sup> To Keats, July 27, 1820

<sup>16</sup> *Monthly Review*, February, 1821

er." In that poem he says that he simply clothed his thoughts in what appeared to be the most obvious and appropriate language. A person familiar with nature and the best books could safely trust to instinct in this matter.

While Shelley looked to the great poets of the past as models, he by no means thought the poet bound to follow them. The world progressed, and situations developed which the poets of the past had never imagined. As in the matter of verse form, so in words, the poet was more or less obliged to make his own medium. While Shelley shows the influence which the "schools" of poetry of his day had upon him,<sup>17</sup> and while he admitted that such influence was inescapable, he denied any conscious imitation<sup>18</sup> of any group of writers. The poet, moreover, is the person to whom one should look for new words and new combination of words. He possesses imagination, the creative faculty, in a more generous degree than does anyone else. Language, as we have seen, was thought by Shelley to be the arbitrary creation of imagination. Why, then, should the poet confine himself to the words used by those who live close to nature? In so far as they have the poetic gift they no doubt vitalize the language; but the poet must exceed them in power, or he is no poet. Shelley is more in accord with

<sup>17</sup> See Medwin's account of a conversation with Shelley in regard to the Lakists and the Cockney School (*Life of Shelley*, II, 36 ff.).

<sup>18</sup> But of course the Wordsworthian phrases in *Alastor* and the echoes of Shakespeare in *The Cenci*, as well as many touches revealing the influence of Milton and Spenser, are apparent. An article in the *Edinburgh Review*, April, 1871, calls attention to many of Shelley's unconscious plagiarisms.

Coleridge than with Wordsworth in the matter of language.

Yet in the creation of new terms or in the introduction of foreign or archaic words the poet is restrained by the necessity of being intelligible, if we are to bear in mind the communication theory. Thus Shelley deprecates Medwin's use of the Indian words in the body of his *Pindarces*. "Strictly, I imagine, every expression in a poem ought to be in itself an intelligible picture." The practice of employing foreign words, he says, was unknown to the great poets of former times, although with Byron, Moore, Southey, and Landor in mind, he admitted that his age seemed to admire this trait.

Shelley uses many archaisms and many innovations. He is fond of *fröre*, using it in the *Revolt of Islam* (l. 3687), in *Rosalind and Helen* (l. 1309), in *Prometheus Unbound* (I, 121), and in *Epipsychidion* (l. 344, and in the *Fragments*, l. 67). He twice uses *glode* in the *Revolt of Islam*:

We *glode* fast o'er a pellucide plam  
Of waters, —l. 554.

the sun returned the steadfast gaze  
Of the Great Image, as o'er heaven it *glode*.

—l. 2176

In the same poem he uses *weets* (l. 1535), *clomb* (l. 2440), *strook* (l. 2675), and the archaic plural *eyne* (l. 4544). In the *Letter to Maria Gisborne* he uses *swink* (l. 59); in *Adonais*, *brere* (l. 160); and in the *Sensitive Plant*, the rare word *griff* (III, 109). The plural *eyne* is also used in the *Vision of the Sea* (l. 93); *treen* is used

in a canceled passage to *Adonais*, and in the *Woodman and the Nightingale*.

Even greater liberty is taken in speaking of "The uprest of the third sun" (*Revolt of Islam*, l. 1292), *uprest* being apparently from Chaucer's *upriste*. From Milton he borrows *imparadise* (*Witch of Atlas*, l. 104), and either coins or borrows such words as *uglification* (*Swellfoot*, I, 409), *circumfluuous* (used in four poems), *circumvolving* (*Swellfoot*, II, i, 152), *intervolved* (*Witch*, l. 92), and *interfluuous* (*Woodman*, l. 4). The reviewer of *Prometheus* in the *London Literary Gazette* ridiculed Shelley's new-fangled and barbarous diction through several columns. Words are used improperly, this critic says. The Titan could not be *nailed* to the cliff by *chains*; there could be no *burning cold*; *swift* whirlwinds could not hang *mute* and *moveless* on poised wings, etc. He objects to the many compounds, such as: *stream-illuminated*, *wind-enchanted*, *thaw-cloven*, *sky-cleaving*, *inter-transpicuous*, *sleep-unsheltered*, *thunder-baffled*, *odour-faded*, and to such locutions as *islanding*, *rays of gloom*, *dispread*, etc. Yet some of these terms, though unknown to the *Gazette* reviewer, were not wholly new. *Rays of gloom*, as someone has said, is probably from Milton's *darkness visible*; *dispread* had been used by Spenser. *Islanding*, according to the Oxford dictionary, was first used by Shelley, but *islanded* had been used in *Thalaba*, and, in fact, its use has been traced back as far as 1661. Although many derivatives and compounds remain to Shelley's credit, yet as a creator or introducer of new words Shelley is less remarkable than Spenser, Milton, or even Southey; less remarkable than

Bentham or Carlyle, who in the ordinary sense are not poets at all. For the words which Shelley introduced have neither been very numerous nor well received.

As we have noted earlier, Shelley believed that poetry should be spontaneous, and that if a certain exactness was gained by careful revision, a corresponding freshness must inevitably be lost. Trelawny's and Medwin's stories, and the corrected and interlined MSS notwithstanding, there can be no doubt that Shelley, in upholding the theme that poetry is inspired and not the result of meticulous labor, was telling how his best work was produced. If the right word would not come he left a blank space, as in the third stanza of *The Zucca*.

For the same reason he was careless in his rhymes. He does not hesitate to use such "eye rhymes" as *earth*, *hearth* (*Julian and Maddalo*, ll. 450-51); *flow*, *now* (*Revolt of Islam*, ll. 1322-23); *stood*, *blood*, and *move*, *above* (*Prometheus*, Act I, 101-2, and Act II, v, 96-97). *Blood* and *stood* he includes in many partial rhymes. In *Prometheus* (Act I, 79-81) we have *blood*, *solitude*; in the *Revolt of Islam* (ll. 1207-9) we have *stood*, *solitude*; in *Prometheus* (I, 75-77) we find *stood*, *multitude*; in the *Mask of Anarchy* (XXXVI), *blood*, *bedewed*, *unwithstood*, *aloud*. No twisting of the pronunciation can make rhymes out of *blossom*, *bosom* (*Epipsychidion*, 11-12) or *speck*, *back* (*Sensitive Plant*, III, 52-53). But, to paraphrase Shelley's words used in reference to evil in poetry, it is not the presence of such technical blemishes which determines that a man is no poet, but the *absence* of imagination. It seems that Shelley's judgment was sound, for what he lost in technical correct-

ness he gained in freshness and spontaneity. Macaulay thought the word *bard* particularly applicable to Shelley; Symonds called him the most spontaneous singer in our language; and to Baynes he recalled the poetical frenzy and divine possession of the ancients.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> No analysis of Shelley's meter is given here, partly because he made no significant references to specific forms of rhythm, and partly because thorough studies of his meter have already been made. *Vide Shelley's Metre*, by J. B. Mayor, *Shelley Society Papers*, Series I, No. 1, pp. 220-61; Swinburne, "Notes on Shelley's Text," *Essays and Studies*; A. Kroder, *Shelley's Verskunst*.

## CHAPTER VI

### BEAUTY: ITS MEANING AND POWER

#### I

Being a moralist and an idealist, Shelley identified the beautiful and the good; the good must be that which is harmonious. With Plato he agreed that "The good is the beautiful and the beautiful is the symmetrical." As a romanticist Shelley combined with the classical doctrine the Christian and sentimental ideals of gentleness and charity. Beauty, then, was perfection, harmony, law, love; it was the creative and sustaining force of the universe. Evil was the discordant, destructive force. That which was evil was formless, ugly, and cruel.

Beauty is the superior power in the universe; and hence nature, though torn with the force of evil, is essentially harmonious. If nature were not an essential harmony it could not endure; the disintegrating power of evil would again reduce it to chaos. But while beauty *can never be wholly vanquished, evil in certain cycles* gains a temporary victory. So it is when the Morning Star in the *Revolt of Islam* is changed

from starry shape beauteous and mild  
To a dire snake, with man and beast unreconciled

At other times Shelley thought of good and evil as "Twin genii, equal gods," which rule the universe with a divided lot. Evil is inherent in nature, an active force, and not merely the refractoriness of matter whose own ne-



cessity resists the divine element of soul. Yet Shelley in his optimistic moments was sure that love or beauty must one day triumph. Every part, every atom, had within itself not only the evil, but its potential cure. This triumph of the good and the beautiful is represented in Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound*. The fault in a work of art which conforms to this view is that the lack of diversity and contrast causes our attention to flag, and our sense of values is dimmed. In the *Defense*, Shelley remembers that diversity and contrast are as important in beauty as are unity and mutual dependence. Diversity and contrast are also necessary elements, he says, in virtue and pleasure.

It is not necessary to accuse Shelley of failing to understand the limitations of human power and of wishing to change the immutable laws of nature. The empirical critics of the nineteenth century who took this view were confusing the standards of life and art more than Shelley himself confused them. Shelley, in his creative imagination, combined and fused the sensory facts, making them conform to aesthetic laws of harmony. The subjective tendency of his idealism made it especially easy for him to disregard the laws of time and place, cause and effect, as they function in the mundane world. While he sometimes confuses the actual and the ideal, as in *Epipsychidion*, he is usually aware of the figurative nature of poetic speech, and that a moment in poetry may be a very long period in life. While he writes in the *Revolt of Islam* and in *Julian and Maddalo* as if reforms could be achieved by an instant act of will, he tells us in prose that sudden reforms are dangerous; that a people who

have long been slaves cannot suddenly become wise and forbearing rulers.

## II

In monarchs, priests, lawyers, military and naval officials, politicians, and financiers, Shelley was able to find no beauty. These were self-seekers, unimaginative, cruel and ugly. The principles of harmony, of mutual dependence, were utterly lacking in them. Most often he found the principles of beauty in women. But perhaps men were no less beautiful, and he does not hesitate to call his own "pardlike spirit" beautiful. The old man in the *Revolt of Islam* is "stately and beautiful"; children are always beautiful; Cythna's child was "beautiful from its birth." The Hermaphrodite created by the Witch is a "sweet monster." Among the forms of nature Shelley describes as beautiful, birds, stars, heaven, evening, eagles, the moon, night, fire, snow, and a great many more things. All things are beautiful which participate in "That Light whose smile kindles the Universe." Instead of distinguishing the sensory materials of beauty one from the other, Shelley uses the terminology of sense impression interchangeably. Thus he speaks of the "melodious hue of beauty," and of the hyacinth's "music" which "felt" like an odor. "Mountain odours keen" complement "wild Aeolian sound," and sweet music fills the pauses in the tales of mighty poets.

Everything is potentially beautiful. Toads and efts, though apparently ugly, can become beautiful, and that with very little change. This doctrine suggests at once the classical and Christian notion of the divinity in all

creation, and the sentimental notion of the essential goodness of all nature. The ability, which Shelley shared with his contemporaries, to see beauty in the large and wild aspects of nature is no doubt due to the same doctrine. While fundamentally harmonious and gentle, nature might present an exterior which was quite the contrary. From Lynmouth he writes, "This place is beautiful, . . . mountains certainly not of less perpendicular elevation than one thousand feet are broken abruptly into valleys of indescribable fertility and grandeur. The climate is so mild, that myrtles of an immense size twine up our cottage, and roses blow in the open air in winter. In addition to these is the sea, which dashes against a rocky and caverned shore, presenting an ever-changing view."<sup>1</sup> Apparently he is equally charmed with the mildness of the climate and the ruggedness of the mountains; the familiar coziness of his cottage, and the vastness and even violence of its environment; with the sense of age and permanence, and with the possibility of constant change.

In the foregoing quotation there is also an association between beauty and utility. Shelley seems to attribute the beauty and grandeur of the valleys not only to their impressive size, but to the luxurious growth found there of things useful or pleasant to man. This view of the beautiful as that which is useful, and in a quantity in excess of bare necessity, is also found in a letter from Switzerland some years later. "We repassed the vale of Servoz," he writes. "a vale more beautiful, because more luxuriant, than that of Chamouni."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> To Godwin, July 5, 1812

<sup>2</sup> To Peacock, July 28, 1816

## III

The notion of beauty which is most often revealed in Shelley's work follows the form-idea conception descended from Plato and Aristotle. But Shelley's idealism is so subjective that he is not always certain that beauty exists anywhere but in his mind:

Where is the love, beauty, and truth we seek  
But in our mind?

asks Julian, and he asserts that we might rule that world of mind and drive out "permitted ill," if we were not weak.

Another notion of beauty, also subjective, according to which beauty is thought to be the perception of a relationship between a high pleasure and its cause, is given in *A Defense of Poetry*. There is, he says, rhythm or proportion in all attempts at imitation. Each kind of mimetic representation has a certain rhythm or harmony which gives more pleasure than any other, and those who can approximate this order are said to have taste. Those who have the power of distinguishing the minute gradations of the pleasurable rhythms are poets; they come at least very close to giving the highest pleasure, which results from things that we call beautiful. According to this conception, beauty, while depending upon an objective form, or a certain sequence of objective forms, yet does not reside in those forms, but in the mind of the observer. A certain combination of sounds or colors or shapes gives one pleasure, and he calls them beautiful. But this word merely marks a relationship between the happiness produced and its cause.

The effect upon the observer of proportion, of relationships between parts, of rhythm, Shelley makes several attempts to analyze in the long letters which he wrote from Italy to his friend Peacock. The columns of a ruined temple at Paestum seemed to be much higher than was actually the case; yet he thought that "the perfect proportions diminish the apprehension of their magnitude; it seems as if inequality and irregularity of form were requisite to force on us the relative idea of greatness." A second temple has columns like those of the first, which "diminish from the base to the capitol, so that but for the chastening effect of their admirable proportions, their magnitude would, from the delusion of perspective, seem greater, not less, than it is; though perhaps we ought to say, not that this symmetry diminishes your apprehension of their magnitude, but that it overpowers the idea of relative greatness, by establishing within itself a system of relations destructive of your idea of its relation with other objects on which our ideas of size depend."

The error of the first observation is explained in the statement wherein he observes that symmetry, by setting up a perfect internal harmony, absorbs the attention, making the mind oblivious to other objects, upon which ideas of size depend. His remarks about St. Peter's (which he thinks inharmonious) and the Pantheon (which he thinks perfectly harmonious) advance the analysis further: St. Peter's, while he knows it is the loliest building in Europe, impresses him as merely exhibiting "littleness on a large scale." But the Panthe-

on, though only a fourth the size of St. Peter's, is a "visible image of the universe; in the perfection of its proportions, as when you regard the unmeasured dome of heaven, the idea of magnitude is swallowed up and lost"<sup>3</sup> When perfect harmony is attained, when all the elements are completely fused, the artist has achieved the true, the beautiful, the eternal, the one. In the highest art time and space do not exist. Beauty is one everywhere, and just as every drop of dew is the world in miniature, so a successful work of art is the visible image of the universe. Whether Shelley regarded the world as matter or spirit, as substance or as idea, he thought of it as so closely unified that every part implied every other. The size of the pillars at Paestum, of the Pantheon, or of any perfect thing is of no consequence. A thing of beauty completely fills the mind, crowding out the things with which we would compare it.

Beauty to Shelley was always dependent upon the perception of harmonious form. Though he is often very vague as to the size and shape of his creations, some of them being the thinnest, most amorphous wraiths, yet there is always a formal or rhythmical factor; if not of shape, then of sound, or odor, or color, or light, which was definite at least to himself. "Four shapeless shadows bright and beautiful" draw the car of the Spirit in the *Daemon of the World*; and it seems probable that Shelley visualized them quite clearly. They were perhaps as definite, though certainly not as deep, as the archetypal forms of the Platonic idealists.

<sup>3</sup> To Peacock, March 23, 1819

## IV

Beauty as an idea existing in the poet's mind or in a world of universal ideas of which the poet's mind is a small but integral part, was fully developed when the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* was written. In that poem he tells us that the awful shadow of some unseen Power visits with its inconstant glance the human heart and countenance, consecrating all that it shines upon with its own hues, and when its fleeting glance is gone, the world is vacant and desolate. Why its presence brings love and hope and its absence leaves hate and despondency no one has been able to answer; but the partial apprehension of this unseen power has resulted, he tells us in *A Defense of Poetry*, in the religions of the world.<sup>4</sup> Demon, ghost, and Heaven are records of the vain endeavor to pierce the infinite. But Beauty alone gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream, and man would be omnipotent and immortal if it (i.e., harmony) would remain constantly in his heart.

In his boyhood he sought vainly to penetrate the mystery of life and death, seeking for ghosts and invok-

<sup>4</sup> Cf. "To return to where we left off," says Boccaccio in his life of Dante, "I say that Theology and Poetry may be said to be almost one where their subject is the same: nay more, I say that Theology is nothing but God's poetry. For what is it but a kind of poetic invention, when in the Scripture Christ is spoken of at one time as a lion, at another as a lamb, sometimes as a worm, at other times as a dragon, at others as a rock, and in many other ways. . . . What else are the words of the Saviour in the Gospel but a discourse of what is beyond the senses, which manner of speaking we in more ordinary language call *allegory*? . . . Aristotle, a most weighty witness in every great matter, . . . affirms that he finds the poets to have been the first theologians" (Quoted by Comthope, "Life of Pope," *Works of Alexander Pope*, V, 50).

ing the "poisonous names" which youth is taught. But these false and conventional attempts failed, and it was only when his imagination, awakened with the spring, sought new channels in deep musings upon life that the first reward came to him.

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped  
 Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,  
 And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing  
 Hopes of high talk with the departed dead  
 I called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed,  
 I was not heard—I saw them not—  
 When musing deeply on the lot  
 Of life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing  
 All vital things that wake to bring  
 News of birds and blossoming,—  
 Sudden, thy shadow fell on me,  
 I shrieked, and clasped my hands in ecstasy!

He does not see the Awful Loveliness; he is merely aware that its shadow, its influence, has fallen upon him. To it he dedicates his life; to it he looks for that harmonizing power which shall free the world from its slavery and supply calm to his own life. "The beauty to which he dedicated himself was indeed intellectual, to be courted by all the powers of mind and apprehended by the exercise, not the sacrifice of reason,"<sup>5</sup> says one critic. Rather, we should say, it was to be courted with the imagination, the poetic faculty, to which reason is but as the shadow to the substance.<sup>6</sup> It is the imagination which apprehends the relationships of things and ideas, and which perceives the before unknown harmonies and

<sup>5</sup> Clutton-Brock, *Shelley, the Man and the Poet*, p. 12

<sup>6</sup> *A Defense of Poetry*



beauties of the world. Shelley uses the word intellectual to indicate that beauty to him is of the mind, is idea, and not sensuous; to distinguish what is universal and eternal from that which is temporal, transient, and local.

Beauty as archetypal idea which exists apart from all its creations appears more clearly in *The Zucca*:

## iii

I loved—oh, no, I mean not one of ye,  
 Or any earthly one, though ye are dear  
 As human heart to human heart may be,—  
 I loved, I know not what—but this low sphere  
 And all that it contains, contains not thee,  
 Thou, whom, seen nowhere, I feel everywhere  
 From Heaven and Earth, and all that in them are,  
 Veiled art thou, like a                      star.

## iv

By Heaven and Earth, from all whose shapes thou flowest,  
 Neither to be contained, delayed, nor hidden;  
 Making divine the loftiest and the lowest,  
 When for a moment thou art not forbidden  
 To live within the life which thou bestowest;  
 And leaving noblest things vacant and chidden,  
 Cold as a corpse after the spirit's flight,  
 Blank as the sun after the birth of night

## v

In winds, and trees, and streams, and all things common,  
 In music and the sweet unconscious tone  
 Of animals, and voices which are human,  
 Meant to express some feelings of their own;  
 In the soft motions and rare smile of woman,  
 In flowers and leaves, and in the grass fresh shown,  
 Or dying in the autumn, I the most  
 Adore thee present or lament thee lost.

All things are beautiful through participating in this beauty which is "eternally uniform and consistent and monoeidic with itself."<sup>7</sup> Though things participating in beauty are subject to production and decay, beauty itself is unproduced, indestructible; it never becomes more or less, or endures any change.

It has been objected that Shelley did not "ascend from a correct system of Love" to a contemplation of the supreme beauty; that he did not proceed as on steps from the love of one form to that of two, and from that of two to that of all forms which are beautiful; from institutions to beautiful doctrines; arriving at last at that which is nothing less than the doctrine of the supreme beauty itself, in the knowledge and contemplation of which at length one reposes.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, it is said, Shelley is not a true Platonist. That may easily be granted; for, speaking strictly, there has been but one true Platonist; just as there has been in the world but one true Christian. But that Shelley's mind was flooded with Plato's idealistic philosophy when he wrote the *Hymn*, *The Zucca*, *The Question*, and many other poems, there can be no doubt.

Aware that he was deficient in the philosophic tranquillity which he admired in the poetry of Wordsworth and in the character of Socrates, Shelley tried to acquire that which he lacked. In 1812 he hoped to learn sobriety and self-control from Godwin. "I hope," he wrote in his third letter to him, "in the course of our communication,

<sup>7</sup> Shelley's translation of the Banquet of Plato *Essays and Letters* (1840), p. 123.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

to acquire that sobriety of spirit which is the characteristic of true heroism." He knew what he needed, and though Godwin the importunate beneficiary, undid much of what was effected by Godwin the unimpassioned votary of reason, progress was made. A rigorous system of diet and long hours of study perhaps taught him more. He could stand absorbed in his book, oblivious to time and meals for a period as long as Socrates is said to have stood lost in profound meditation, or in mystical communion with supreme beauty. One who would truly be a man, he says in the *Sonnet: Political Greatness*,

Must rule the empire of himself, in it  
Must be supreme, establishing his throne  
On vanquished will, quelling the anarchy  
Of hopes and fears, being himself alone.

Capricious will, or impulse, must be ruled; man must separate himself from the importunities of the transitory things of this world. Perhaps the Phaedrus myth influenced his utterance. At any rate he was pre-occupied with the importance of discipline in both life and art. He counsels Medwin to discipline his powers, for though poetry springs from a native and involuntary source, it "requires in its development severe attention."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> August 22, 1821. Similarly he advises Henry Reveley to discipline himself in English, and Clare Clairmont to discipline her emotions. Shelley's progress in self-discipline can be seen by comparing *Queen Mab* or *Alastor* with the *Triumph of Life*. In the latter, he has learned that "the thirst for the infinite, unless steadied by the endurance that can support its privation, will send a man to the devil" (*vide* F. Melian Stawell, "Shelley's 'Triumph of Life,'" *Essays and Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), Vol. V; cf. Shelley's lines to *Excursion*, V, 517-22).

What disciplinary steps had preceded the appearance of the shadow of beauty recorded in the *Hymn* it is not possible to say. Universal beauty does not appear to Shelley in the form of a mature divinity, as Athene sprang full-grown from the head of Jove; Shelley in this poem does not see the "eternally uniform and consistent and monoeidic with itself." He never sees it, for it is always veiled from our weak and obscure organs which endure no light. In the *Hymn* he says its *shadow* falls upon him, a figurative way of saying that he received the first inkling of beauty, the first glimmer of truth, and this sudden, though partial, revelation had a transporting effect upon him; he had what James would call a mystical experience. And this sudden illumination which was but a partial and obscure glimpse of the beautiful was not obtained by calling up ghosts of the dead or by uttering magical cabals; it came through meditation, through "musing deeply"—as Socrates himself might have mused, although the steps recommended by Diotima are not enumerated. The appearance of the shadow was sudden; Diotima says that, "He who has been disciplined . . . by contemplating beautiful objects gradually, and in their order, now arriving at the end of all that concerns Love, on a sudden beholds a beauty wonderful in its nature"; but she says further that when the doctrine of supreme beauty is arrived at the seeker at length reposes in the knowledge and contemplation of it. While the intimation, the shadow, came suddenly to the youthful poet, he did not repose in the contemplation; instead he prayed that he might retain the little which had been revealed to him. He vowed in that hour to ded-

icate himself to beauty, to the pursuit of something yet lacking; and (in what represents the present time in the poem) he invokes the phantoms of a thousand past hours to testify to his studious and loving zeal. The fifth stanza of the *Hymn* tells, not about the consummation of his wooing of beauty, but of the successful culmination of an early stage.

The similarity between Shelley's idea of beauty and Plato's is close, though it would be idle to press the similarity too far. As Shelley himself said, every man is the product of the age in which he lives. Shelley reflects his reading of the modern idealists and the skeptics. His sentimentalism and humanitarianism are certainly not classical. He does not distrust the emotions, as did Plato, nor did he despair of man's ability to reach the truth. Shelley's notion of imitation, as pointed out in an earlier chapter, is partly Platonic, but Shelley goes beyond his teacher. In spite of the equality of mind and courage in Laon and Cythna, which is similar to the status that men and women were to enjoy in the ideal republic, Shelley's sentimental reverence for his ideal woman would have been incomprehensible to Plato.

So long as Shelley sees beauty as idea which cannot be "figured to the imagination like a beautiful face, or beautiful hands, or any portion of the body, nor like any discourse, nor any science," nor as subsisting in "any other that lives or is either in earth or in heaven, or in any other place"; but as something which is "eternally uniform and consistent, and monoeidic with itself," he is a follower of Plato. This he often does more or less perfectly. Beauty, as in *The Zucca*, is seen nowhere, but

felt everywhere; it exists not in this low sphere nor in heaven, but its power makes divine the loftiest and the lowest. Its presence in winds, trees, streams, music, voices of animals and of men, in flowers and leaves, in autumn, in the motions and the smile of woman, makes him worship, and its absence makes him lament.

## V

This proneness to see beauty in the soft motions and the rare smile of woman was to Shelley the source of difficulty, both marital and philosophical. From *Alastor* to *Epipsyichidion* we can trace the history of his conflicts. On the one hand we have his idealistic philosophy On the other, his susceptibility to women. If the two could have been kept apart, all would have been well, perhaps, for his idealism. But we have noticed his tendency toward personification and myth-making. Also we have noticed his assertion that there is no intrinsic difference between sensation and idea, between objective and subjective. Now, the idealist grew dissatisfied with his idealism; he was a poet essentially—not a metaphysician: and he was a man. He craved emotional satisfaction, and although his imagery is naturally tenuous and ethereal, as an artist his attention inevitably must turn to the concrete.<sup>10</sup> Hence the tendency to personify beauty as a feminine spirit such as appears in dream to the Poet in *Alastor*.

But this fair spirit is not really Shelley's idea of

<sup>10</sup> Macaulay believed "there can be no stronger sign of a mind truly poetical than a disposition to make individuals out of generalities" *Vide* his review of Southey's edition of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Edinburgh Review*, LIV, 454

beauty. She is rather an artistic symbol for beauty, just as Emilia is a symbol for beauty, just as the west wind is a symbol for deity. But as has been pointed out, Shelley seldom cared to mark the distinction between the actual and the imaginative, and when this enthusiasm glows most fervently the symbol and the thing become convertible. A thing of beauty completely fills the mind, a drop of dew is the world in miniature. The dew drop may be looked upon as the universe, and a beautiful thing, as the whole-containing part, may be regarded as beauty. But the discrepancy between the shadow and the substance, between the flesh and the spirit, between symbol and the idea could not be long concealed, and Shelley on learning of Emilia's limitations, had to admit, as he had done ten years before about his cousin, that he had "concreted"<sup>11</sup> the abstract of perfection, had sought in mortal form the likeness of that which is eternal.<sup>12</sup>

Symbols for beauty are frequently used by Shelley. In the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* the poet supplicates an invisible Power which, figuratively at least, flies and casts a shadow; but it is rather an all-pervasive, omnipresent power, like the pantheistic deity, than anthropomorphic. The tendency toward personification of the idea beauty is perhaps more apparent in *The Question*. The poet dreams that he is wandering at the water's edge where he derives keen pleasure from the sight and odor of many flowers:

Methought that of these visionary flowers  
I made a nosegay, bound in such a way

<sup>11</sup> See the letter to Hogg, June 2, 1811.

<sup>12</sup> See the letter to Gisborne, June 18, 1822.

That the same hues, which in their natural bowers  
 Were mingled or opposed, the like array  
 Kept these imprisoned children of the Hours  
 Within my hand,—and then, elate and gay,  
 I hastened to the spot whence I had come,  
 That I might there present it!—Oh! to whom?

As Medwin<sup>13</sup> suggested, Shelley means to pay homage to the Spirit of Beauty whose power he has worshiped in the flowers. But, unlike the metaphysician, the artist must be concrete; the poet must employ symbols which can be visualized. The foregoing poem ends with a question which merely suggests the symbol, yet the nosegay clearly points to a feminine figure as the symbol of beauty. He will not present his gift to a woman; but to a feminine spirit of beauty. The poet in that imaginative borderland between sensation and ideation which is the realm of poetry dramatizes the philosophical concept; thus the Witch of Atlas represents beauty and love; the feminine "Shape all light" which appears in the *Triumph of Life*, brighter than the sun, the light of heaven, for ever sought, for ever lost, represents beauty;<sup>14</sup> in the *Epipsychidion* the poet is part of the time in the mundane world addressing the beautiful Emilia Viviani; part of the time he is in an ideal world, in an

. . . isle 'twixt Heaven, Air, Earth, and Sea,  
 Cradled and hung in clear tranquillity;

and there he addresses a symbol of beauty in feminine form. But this can be no more than the artistic repre-

<sup>13</sup> *Life of Shelley*, II, 129.

<sup>14</sup> *Triumph of Life*, 352-431.



sentation of the archetypal idea beauty. For beauty was already present in the island as the poet describes it to Emily when urging her to fly there. Beauty, it will be recalled, apart from any symbol, is the fundamental harmony. In the island to which he wishes to retire with Emily, all is sweetness, gentleness:

And every motion, odour, beam, and tone,  
With that deep music is in unison.  
Which is a soul within the soul—they seem  
Like echoes of an antenatal dream.

And in the heart of this delicious isle burns a Soul,

An atom of the Eternal, whose own smile  
Unfolds itself, and may be felt, not seen  
O'er the gray rocks, blue waves, and forests green,  
Filling their bare and void interstices.

Beauty is the soul within the soul, the deep music, the Eternal; and its presence already fills the tranquil isle. It is that which gives reality to the world of appearances.

Emily, it is true, is described as "too gentle to be human," and as veiling in the form of woman the light and love and immortality in her which would otherwise be insupportable. She is further described as youth's vision made perfect, a reference to the feminine ideal of *Alastor*. The poet regrets that the mortal incarnation of this ideal woman is not his sister:

Would we two had been twins of the same mother!  
Or, that the name my heart lent to another  
Could be a sister's bond for her and thee,  
Blending two beams of one eternity!

Evidently he regards these two women, Emilia and Mary, as "two beams," two reflections of beauty, the

“one eternity.” Later (ll. 355-70) he compares them to the “married lights” of heaven; one (Mary) does not disdain “even a borrowed might”; the other (Emilia) is a source of beauty in all other things. Yet, this vision of his youth which had been for so long veiled from him, and which he met at last in Emily, even though she had such powers, was not beauty, but was a beautiful emanation. While she had the power of infusing beauty into the dead, blank air, this serene omnipresence which she had power to emit at last united with the great power, the true and universal beauty:

In her mild lights the starry spirits dance,  
 The sunbeams of those wells which ever leap  
 Under the lightnings of the soul—too deep  
 For the brief fathom-line of thought or sense  
 The glory of her being, issuing thence,  
 Stains the dead cold, blank air with a warm shade  
 Of unentangled intermixture, made  
 By Love, of light and motion· one intense  
 Diffusion, one serene Omnipresence,  
 Whose flowing outlines mingle in their flowing  
 Around her cheeks and utmost fingers flowing  
 With the unintermitted blood, which there  
 Quivers, (as in a fleece of snow-like air  
 The crimson pulse of living morning quiver,)  
 Continuously prolonged, and ending never,  
*Till they are lost, and in that Beauty furled*  
*Which penetrates and clasps and fills the world,*  
 Scarce visible from extreme loveliness.

—ll. 86-104.

The glory issuing from her soul is the work of Love (harmony), and it at last unites with and is lost in Universal Beauty, too dazzling to be visible. The love of

beauty which is present in the soul of this wonderful being generates beauty, or makes it possible for beauty to reproduce itself.

The relation of the poet to this feminine vision which had long haunted him, and which in the *Epi-psychidion* he tried to identify with Emily, is indicated in two ways. As the soul out of his soul (l. 238), he means to indicate that she represented his idea; she was an embodiment of the inner harmony of his own soul, and as such she was closely allied to the deep music, the "soul within a soul" (l. 455), which is beauty. The other relationship indicated harks back to the *Symposium*. The poet and Emily are like notes of music, he says, which, though dissimilar, yet are made for one another, and complement each other (ll. 142-46). "I am not, thine: I am part of thee" (l. 52). As in the story told by Aristophanes, the poet seems to have in mind a bodily and spiritual union of mutually complementary parts formerly united, but long severed.

The poem does not represent the passionate desire of masculine Love to unite in spiritual marriage with a feminine beauty. Rather, the desire is to fuse the complementary inner souls of the two, and in that union to penetrate into the rare universe of love, into the perfect harmony of the infinite. The Poet in *Alastor* dreamed that a veiled maid talked to him and

Her voice was like the voice of his own soul  
Heard in the calm of thought,

Here was the complement to the imperfect beauty in his own soul. So with the poet and Emily; for sensitive to his own imperfections, he was prone to find more beau-

ty in Emily than in himself.<sup>15</sup> To him she was an "embodied Ray of the Great Brightness," and the beauty on the earth's breast was *like* the shadow of her soul; but she *was* not the great brightness, and earthly beauty *was* not the shadow of her soul. "Woe is me!" says Shelley in the concluding verses, not because the dream union with the feminine ideal cannot be consummated; not because an earthly flight to a happy island is impracticable; but because he cannot get away from his mundane symbols—himself and Emilia—into a mystical union with the infinite. He never achieves the last and highest mystical state.

## VI

Beauty as perfection, or rhythm, or harmony, or light, or as the apperception of them, is inseparable from love. Beauty and love are but two modes or attributes of harmony, the underlying principle of the universe; that which binds the world together. The terms beauty and love are convertible: beauty produces love, and love generates beauty. Love is a supreme power superior to Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance, and Change.<sup>16</sup> Beauty, through the mind, gives reality to the phantoms which throng it. These apparitions, dim at first, grow radiant,

as the mind, arising bright  
From the embrace of beauty (whence the forms

<sup>15</sup> Compare. It is thyself, mine own self's better part,  
Mine eye's clear eye, my dear heart's dearer  
heart, etc

—*Comedy of Errors*, III, ii, 61 ff

<sup>16</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, Act II, scene iv, 120.

Of which these are the phantoms) casts on them  
The gathered rays which are reality.<sup>17</sup>

Asia, generally regarded as a symbol for love, is also a symbol for beauty. Prometheus addresses her as

thou light of life,  
Shadow of beauty unbeheld.<sup>18</sup>

As discord and evil are vanquished in the drama, love grows and increases in power, and Asia, its symbol, acquires more and more the attributes of the Platonic beauty:

*Panthea*. How thou art changed! I dare not look on thee;  
I feel but see thee not. I scarce endure  
The radiance of thy beauty.<sup>19</sup>

Asia, the character, is almost dissolved in or absorbed by the archetypal idea. She has a radiance too bright for human eyes, a light which inspires awe and veneration. But Asia, no more than Emily, is beauty. As in the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, we have but the *shadow* of that invisible formative idea which gives reality to the phantoms of the mind. Beauty creates splendid images, such as the ideal of feminine loveliness which runs through many poems from *Alastor* to *Epipsychidion*; and, at times, Shelley's love of myth and personification, expressive of the artist's need for concrete imagery, tends to break down the distinction between symbol and that symbolized; but these lovely veiled figures are only shadows—emanations—of the archetypal idea.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, Act III, scene iii, 49-53.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Act III, scene iii, 7-8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Act II, scene v, 16-18.

Love is a result of beholding beauty, and beauty is also produced by love:

Thou art the wine whose drunkenness is all  
We can desire, O Love! and happy souls,  
Ere from thy vine the leaves of autumn fall,

Catch thee, and feed from their o'erflowing bowls  
Thousands who thirst for thine ambrosial dew:  
Thou art the radiance which where ocean rolls

Investeth it: and when the heavens are blue  
Thou fillest them; and when the earth is fair  
The shadow of thy moving wings imbue

Its deserts and its mountains, till they wear  
Beauty like some light robe.

—*Prince Athanase*, Fragment 5.

## VII

The central and unifying power of Shelley's idealistic universe is Love, or Harmony, or Beauty, or Wisdom, or Pleasure. Sometimes he uses the five preceding terms, with God and Nature, as if they were all convertible and but different names for the same thing.<sup>20</sup> Nature, the "Mother of this unfathomable world" which he invokes

<sup>20</sup> Plato also celebrated the supreme power of the universe under various names such as the One, the supreme Good, Wisdom, Beauty, etc. *Vide* Lillian Winstanley, "Platonism in Shelley," *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), Vol. IV. The notion that harmony is the sustaining force of the universe has often been expressed. See, for example, Dryden's "Song for St. Cecilia's Day":

From Harmony, from Heavenly Harmony  
This universal frame began, etc.

Carlyle, in his "Shakespeare," said, " . . . For whatever exists has a harmony in the heart of it, or it would not hold together and exist."

in *Alastor* is, like beauty, visible only by her shadow.<sup>21</sup> Wisdom has the same attributes. In Laone's song wisdom is addressed as a vast spirit which regenerates mankind and casts its inspiring shadow upon poets:

O Spirit vast and deep as Night and Heaven!  
 Mother and soul of all to which is given  
 The light of life, the loveliness of being,  
 Lo! thou dost re-ascend the human heart,  
 Thy throne of power, almighty as thou wert  
 In dreams of Poets old grown pale by seeing  
 The shade of thee—now, millions start  
 To feel thy lightnings through them burning.  
 Nature, or God, or Love, or Pleasure,  
 Or Sympathy the sad tears turning  
 To mutual smiles, . . .<sup>22</sup>

Nature's art is, like Love's and Beauty's, that of harmony. In one of the later songs Shelley says that

the touch of Nature's art  
 Harmonizes heart to heart.<sup>23</sup>

Beauty, under whatever name it is considered, is the greatest power of the universe; it is the central principle, which by its embrace gives reality to phantoms. It "penetrates and clasps and fills the world,"<sup>24</sup> vanquishing evil and stripping off the veils from error. The beauty which shone in the Witch caused the lion cubs to forego their inborn thirst for blood, and the pard "unstrung his sinews" at her feet. As the symbol of beauty,

<sup>21</sup> Lines 13-22.

<sup>22</sup> *Revolt of Islam*, Canto V, li, 2.

<sup>23</sup> *To Jane: The Invitation*, ll. 27-28 Cf. Shakespeare's "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin" (*Troilus and Cressida*, III, iii, 175).

<sup>24</sup> *Epipsychidion*, ll. 102-4

the Witch of this fanciful poem has in her possession all the materials of art, and she has scrolls teaching the lore of wisdom and love. No one who had seen the beautiful Witch could ever bear to look at anything less perfect. The poet who has seen even the shadow of beauty must ever after follow in her footsteps, must dedicate himself to virtue and love.

The light of beauty alone, as he says in the *Hymn*, "Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream." Without this formative power of beauty all would be chaos; and when the light of beauty has once shone upon a favored soul he must dedicate himself to it. This was Shelley's course, and, as has been said in an earlier chapter, it gave an unavoidable, an inevitable moral (though not inevitably didactic) trend to his poetry. There was always the passionate hope that beauty, whose votary he was, would free the world from its dark slavery, and there was the hope that his words might quicken the new birth.

Beauty, as Shelley many times says, is veiled and, as he says in the *Defense*, perhaps it is necessary that it be veiled because of the weakness of our organs. Beauty too suddenly encountered may make the hearts that feed thereon "Sick with excess of sweetness." And while beauty generally draws all toward itself, it is, like God, loving and yet terrible. Beauty, he says in *Ginevra*, "awes All hearts with its approach, though unbeheld."<sup>26</sup> Panthea is awed by her sister, and Emily, when the poet hunts vainly for fancies that suit her, is called both a Beauty and a Terror. But the awe and terror which

<sup>26</sup> Lines 135-36.



beauty inspires is due to our own imperfection, just as one may suppose that the fear of God is due to a sense of sin. Ordinarily beauty is a harmonizing, a unifying power, inciting the poet to effort. "Their beauty," says Ione, referring to the Spirits, "gives me voice."<sup>26</sup>

## VIII

Shelley's attitude toward beauty is that of religious veneration. It has been said that Shelley's notion of beauty, though spirit rather than idea, was without will, unmoral, and not an object of virtue.<sup>27</sup> This statement seems to be erroneous at every point. Shelley's notion of beauty was *not* changed to an animated spirit; the abstract idea was represented by images for the purposes of art; it remained "idea" and its synonyms are love, harmony, wisdom, liberty, light—even nature. For artistic purposes Shelley indulged his mythological tendency and we have such symbols as the dream spirit of *Alastor*, as Asia, the Witch, and Emily. Much dimmer are the Power, the Spirit of Beauty of the *Hymn*, and the suggestion of a figure in *The Question*. In *The Zucca* there is no anthropomorphic embodiment at all. In all of these poems, whether there is a central symbol or not, beauty is everywhere, informing everything, giving stability and reality to all.

<sup>26</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, I, 759.

<sup>27</sup> Bagehot, *Literary Studies*, I, 99. When Bagehot says that Shelley was lacking in "ethical consciousness" he is merely telling how a radical was looked upon by a Victorian moralist; and when he says that Shelley's belief in God was defective, he is also registering a personal disapproval of Shelley's admittedly indefinite and fluctuating religion.

Toward this power, whether symbolized as a goddess or as an inscrutable force, Shelley's attitude is prayerful; he supplicates an omnipotent power which is inevitably virtuous—to his mind infinitely superior in virtue to the God of the Scriptures:

Great Spirit, deepest Love!  
Which rulest and dost move  
All things which live and are, within the Italian Shore;  
Who spreadest Heaven around it  
Whose woods, rocks, waves surround it,  
Who sittest in thy star, o'er Ocean's western floor;  
Spirit of beauty! at whose soft command  
The sunbeams and the showers distil its foison  
From the Earth's bosom chill;  
Oh, bid those beams be each a blinding brand  
Of lightning! bid those showers be dews of poison!  
Bid the Earth's plenty kill!  
Bid thy bright Heaven above,  
Whilst light and darkness bound it,  
Be their tomb who planned  
To make it ours and thine!  
Or, with thine harmonizing ardours fill  
And raise thy sons, as o'er the prone horizon  
Thy lamp feeds every twilight wave with fire—  
Be man's high hope and unextinct desire  
The instrument to work thy will divine!  
Then clouds from sunbeams, antelopes from leopards,  
And frowns and fears from thee,  
Would not more swiftly flee  
Than Celtic wolves from the Ausonian shepherds—  
Whatever, Spirit, from thy starry shrine  
Thou yieldest or withholdest, oh, let be  
This city of thy worship ever free!<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Ode to Naples*, Epode II b.

In *Alastor*, which is pantheistic, Shelley uses the imagery borrowed from Plato which he later used in the *Hymn*. Nature, or the "Mother of this unfathomable world," like the Spirit of Beauty, is known by its *shadow*, i.e., by its corrupt earthly manifestations, and in both poems the poet's attitude is one of religious veneration and devotion.

Mother of this unfathomable world!  
Favour my solemn song, for I have loved  
Thee ever, and thee only, I have watched  
Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps,  
And my heart ever gazes on the depth  
Of thy deep mysteries.

In the *Hymn* it is the shadow of the Spirit of Beauty which moves him to ecstasy; it is the sudden recognition of a divine element in things earthly which causes him to shriek; it is to an invisible, awful loveliness that he looks for power in his words, for the hope of freedom for mankind, for future calm or harmony in his own soul:

Thus let thy power, which like the truth  
Of nature on my passive youth  
Descended, to my onward life supply  
Its calm—to one who worships thee,  
And every form containing thee,,  
Whom, *Spirit* fair, thy spells did bind  
To fear himself, and love all human kind

## IX

As was said early in this chapter, Shelley was able to see beauty in the rugged and grand aspects of nature and in ruins. In this respect he diverges from the pseudo-classical taste of the eighteenth century, and reflects

his reading of the Gothic writers. The Gothic school, a sort of antidote to the false prettiness of the previous age, marked a transition between eighteenth-century classicism and the Romantic Revival. Shelley's early imitations of the school of terror came forty-five years after the first great success in that field, and a dozen years after *Lyrical Ballads*, which marked the new age. According to Medwin (if anything more than Shelley's own work is necessary by way of testimony) this early work "serves to show the disposition and bent of his mind in 1808 and 1809, which ran on bandits, castles, ruined towers, wild mountains, storms and apparitions—the terrific, which, according to Burke, is the great machinery of the sublime." The whole school of terror was a result of the rather sudden awakening of interest in what had previously been distasteful and repellent, and the aesthetic theory of the day represents an attempt to analyze this new reaction; at the same time it is a tacit admission of the inadequacy of the pseudo-classical conception of beauty.

Unlike Burke, Shelley usually makes no distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. Between 1765, the date of Burke's essay on the *Sublime and the Beautiful*, and 1816, the date of Shelley's first mature poem, *Alastor*, the Romantic Revival had sprung up and bloomed. The love of nature in its wilder aspects; the admiration for the vast; the boundless aspirations which were impossible of fulfilment; the search for aesthetic satisfaction in the simple, the crude, and even the abnormal, had immeasurably extended the meaning of beauty. Shelley's idealism, derived largely from the an-

## 178 SHELLEY: HIS THEORY OF POETRY

cients, nevertheless fitted in very well with these new attitudes. Everything is beautiful which in a greater or lesser degree participates in the universal idea beauty. Beauty as the fundamental law and harmony of the universe cannot be wholly absent in any part of nature. Sentimentalism contributed toward the identification of beauty and love; for love is also harmony, the principle of unification; and further it is the power of generation, of creation. Naturalism and pantheism added the religious note. Out of a mélange of classical and modern philosophy, of sentimentalism, pantheism, and naturalism, and the representation of these doctrines as they are found in literature from Homer to Wordsworth, Shelley built up his concept of beauty.

Even before *Alastor* Shelley made no distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. In the first book of *Queen Mab* we read:

When every sight of lovely, wild and grand  
Astonishes, enraptures, elevates,  
When fancy at a glance combines  
The wondrous and the beautiful.

—ll 70-73.

In 1811 he wrote from Keswick, "The scenery here is awfully beautiful." In the *Daemon of the World*, the spirit is described as "A shape so wild, so bright, so beautiful" (I, 71). In the *Unfinished Drama* there is a being who

was so awful, yet  
So beautiful in mystery and terror.

—ll. 103-4.

In the *Revolt of Islam* Cythna says,

I struggled with that dream, which like a beast  
Most fierce and beauteous, in my memory  
Had made its lair, and on my heart did feast

—VII, xxv.

In *Epipsychidion* one of the poet's loves, presumably Clare, is addressed as a comet "beautiful and fierce." The association of beauty with ferocity, terror, awe, magnitude, mystery, majesty, infinity, and other qualities which Burke called the attributes of sublimity, is frequently encountered in both Shelley's poetry and prose. Ruin is associated with both beauty and sublimity. In the *Epipsychidion* he asks Emily to go with him to an island "Beautiful as a wreck of Paradise." "I can scarcely believe," he wrote of the Coliseum, "that when encrusted with Dorian marble and ornamented by columns of Egyptian granite, its effect could have been so sublime and so impressive as in its present state."<sup>20</sup> While the usual association of sublimity with grandeur is frequently found in Shelley's poetry, sublimity is also associated with mildness, just as ferocity was associated with beauty. Sidney is described as "Sublimely mild, a Spirit without spot."<sup>21</sup> From the Niobe and a statue of Apollo he also obtained the effect of sublimity, that is, elevation: "I spent three hours this morning principally in the contemplation of the Niobe and of a favorite Apollo," he writes; "all worldly thoughts and cares seem to vanish from before the sublime emotions such spectacles create."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> To Peacock, December 22, 1818.

<sup>21</sup> *Adonais*, XLV, 7.

<sup>21</sup> To Mary, August 1, 1821.

Sometimes there is in what Shelley calls beautiful a reflection of the morbidity and lack of robustness of the eighteenth century which associated beauty with weakness, helplessness, or sickness: In *Julian and Maddalo* we get an example of the association of beauty and illness in the verse in which a leaf is described as being "In hue too beautiful for health."

Those qualities dwelt upon by the eighteenth century as attributes of the sublime, and which were enumerated by Burke, are often found in Shelley's works. In this vein Shelley wrote: "From Gaeta to Terracina the whole scenery is of the most sublime character. At Terracina, precipitous, conical crags of immense height shoot into the sky and overhang the sea. At Albano, we arrived again in sight of Rome. Arches after arches in unending lines stretching across the uninhabited wilderness, the blue-defined line of the mountains seen between them; masses of nameless ruin standing like rocks out of the plain."<sup>182</sup> In a description of Spoleto the elements which contribute toward the effect of sublimity are greatness, precipitousness, violence (implied in the mountain torrent), astonishing elevation (of an aqueduct again), and antiquity. He concludes, "I never saw a more impressive picture; in which the shapes of nature are of the grandest order, but over which the creations of man sublime from their antiquity and greatness, seem to predominate." Arches and colonnades are often mentioned as sublime: "At length we saw the sublime and massy colonnades, skirting the horizon of the wilderness."<sup>183</sup>

<sup>182</sup> To Peacock, March 23, 1819.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, February 25, 1819.

Fear does not seem to have any special importance in Shelley's notion of the sublime. In fact there was to Shelley no more fear in the sublime than in the beautiful. Beauty, as in Plato, inspired awe in all who were aware of its presence; beauty is even a terror. This was in accord with Shelley's metaphysic, and it was also a result of his personality. According to Trelawny's and Byron's accounts, he was incapable of physical fear, and it may be for this reason that it is not given any importance in his remarks on the sublime. His clearest account of the effect of the sublime upon the beholder is perhaps the following: "The immensity of these aerial summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of ecstatic wonder, not unallied with madness."<sup>84</sup>

In one of his letters from Italy there is a distinction of the conventional sort between the beautiful and the sublime. He describes a picture by Guercino representing a monk with a youth praying in the desert beside an altar upon which stood a skull and crucifix. "His face was wrinkled like a dried snake's skin, and drawn in long, hard lines: his very hands were wrinkled. He looked like an animated mummy. He was clothed in a loose dress of death-coloured flannel, such as you might fancy a shroud might be, after it had wrapped a corpse a month or two. It had a yellow, putrified, ghastly hue, which it cast on all the objects around, so that the hands and face of the Carthusian and his companion were jaundiced by this sepulchral glimmer." This is apparently a recrudescence of the notion of sublimity which had charmed Shelley in his youth, and which, like the

<sup>84</sup> To Peacock, from Chamouni, July 22, 1816.



teachings of the French naturalists, always remained in his subconscious mind ready to crop out when chance permitted, as in the above. He continues, "the gloomy effect of this was softened and at the same time, its *sublimity diminished*, by the figure of the Virgin and Child in the sky, looking down with admiration on the monk, and a beautiful flying figure of an angel."<sup>35</sup>

But usually Shelley found harmony and proportion in magnitude, grace in the awful, and charm in the violent. An object to him was at once beautiful and terrible, sublime and lovely. Of the ruined Baths of Caracalla he says, "Never was desolation more sublime and lovely."<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, November 9, 1818 (Italics mine.)

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, March 23, 1819.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE POET AS CRITIC

#### I

It is a dangerous invasion  
When poets criticize; their station  
Is to delight, not pose.

This statement seems no more consistent than was Carlyle's preaching of the doctrine of silence in twenty volumes. In the above passage the poet, himself turning critic, criticizes other poets who have ventured into the field of criticism. In a prose statement he is even more severe: "Reviewers, with some rare exceptions, are a most stupid and malignant race. As a bankrupt thief turns thief-taker in despair, so an unsuccessful author turns critic." Many of Shelley's contemporaries would no doubt have been glad to turn this statement against him when he wrote the *Defense*—had they known it, and had the *Defense* been published in his lifetime.

It may seem impossible to reconcile the foregoing statements with Shelley's own practices, for much of his prose writing (although, with the exception of the *Defense*, his prefaces, and two or three reviews, it was not intended for publication) was of a critical nature. But when we recall the abusive critiques of Shelley's poems we can agree that he had ample provocation for these severe strictures on critics and criticism.

But it is not to be supposed that Shelley had, even in

moments when his mind was not irritated by the abuse of the reviewers, any such high opinion of the function of criticism as had been held by the eighteenth-century neo-classicists, or as was later held by the Victorians. The judging of literature by objective standards was in Shelley's day in bad repute. The old set of standards had, largely owing to Wordsworth, broken down, and while many new critical doctrines as to language, the proper material for poetry, etc., had been advanced, there was little agreement among the poets as to the value of these tenets, in fact, most of the poets were impatient of any restraint upon their genius. The eighteenth-century doctrines of good sense, moderation, and standardization of form were, to use a phrase which was an early favorite with Shelley, "approaching dissolution." The critics, who still largely represented the older point of view, seemed to be engaged in a struggle to the death with the spontaneity, enthusiasm, individualism, and daring of the new "schools"—Lake, Satanic, and Cockney. It is no wonder that there was more heat than light, and no sweetness at all. But the situation exemplifies beautifully Shelley's belief that criticism has ever followed, not preceded, the opinions of mankind. To Shelley the imagination, the poetic gift, is the source of the new; the criticism which abused him and which he censured was based upon past usages, and hence inevitably lagged behind the arts—in this case so far behind as to be a menace. Shelley believed that the same period does not produce a high order of original and of critical writing. Criticism, he says, can only arise after literature has flowered. Longinus could not have been the

contemporary of Honier, nor Boileau of Horace. Yet like Horace, Shelley combined in his own person the powers of both poet and critic.

The criticism of the day was especially irritating to Shelley because he believed that inferior poets who had access to journals were presuming to regulate and to limit the powers of genius. The mediocre men of talent sought to teach the divinely inspired; they were exercising a power wholly disproportionate to their merits.

## II

When we examine other statements made by Shelley we find that his strictures on the critics represent more than a momentary irritation. As we have already observed, he really believed in the separation of the man and the poet, though both inhabit the same body. We find a reflection of the mysticism of Plato; the separation of critical reason and poetic imagination: "Poets," says Shelley in the *Defense*, "are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not but moves." When the period of inspiration is over the poet again becomes a man like other men, subject to the influences which surround him. His attempts to explain the poet—the other half of himself—might be no more enlightening than were the explanations of their own poems which the poets made to Socrates. The separation of the man and the poet would make it impossible for the poet (in

his ordinary state) to explain his own poetry; it would be quite as impossible for an unimaginative person to judge by rational, mundane standards the poems of another. The only common ground for artist and critic, then, is the imaginative; the only critic adequate for the task before him is he who can enter with the artist into the world of imagination; he who can penetrate beyond the veil of familiar appearances into the ideal world of the poet. A sympathetic attitude toward the creative work is a first requisite; like the translator, the critic must try to put himself into the frame of mind of the author when the work was first produced. Perhaps his imagination may then become heated sufficiently for the production of something of value. As Dowden suggests, this seems to have been Shelley's attitude when he wrote the note on the "Madonna Suckling" by Guido: "There is what an unfeeling observer would call a dulness in the expression of her face; her eyes are almost closed; her lip depressed; there is a serious, and even heavy relaxation, as it were, of all the muscles which are called into action by ordinary emotions; but it is only as if the spirit of love, almost insupportable from its intensity, were brooding over and weighing down the soul, or whatever it is, without which the material frame is inanimate and inexpressive."

This sense of double personality has been present in many poets, and the basis of it is now clearer than it was in Shelley's time. The poetic mind is the subconscious, or unconscious mind, as Professor Prescott calls it, and it functions in an associative, undirected manner, apparently out of the poet's control. When the train of

association has run out, the result may be a rough poem or merely a day dream. The old nary, conscious, directed mode of thought is then resumed to carry on the practical functions of life. The truth of Shelley's assertion that the rational man cannot comprehend the poet lies in the fact that the conscious mind never has complete access to all the stored up content of the whole mind; it is, in fact, master of only a small portion of that which may be available to the spontaneous working of the poetic mind. Hence critics working according to rational, objective standards are merely men of talent, able to command but little material, and criticism of this sort must be very inferior to that which is criticized. The validity of criticism must depend largely then, upon its spontaneous, associative method. This, in spite of some evidence which we find for objective standards of criticism, must lead us to conclude that the personal, appreciative, and imaginative criticism was thought by Shelley to be of greater value than the rational and objective. And this is, of course, the Romantic point of view.

Although few critics of Shelley's day could meet any such requirements, he would never have stigmatized them as he did had he not, as a revolutionist and innovator, been exposed to violent attacks by the strongly intrenched, yet fearful, conservative element in religion, politics, and art. Criticism which was representative of the Romantic revolt had not yet made itself felt against the united front of the periodicals. When Shelley speaks of critics he therefore means those abusive individuals who wrote for the *Gazette*, the *Quarterly*, etc., and who

damned as unintelligible or subversive everything which was new in subject or in treatment. Just as Wordsworth felt the necessity for explaining and defending his poetic theories, so Shelley felt it incumbent upon himself to write prefaces, notes, letters to publishers and to his friends. When Peacock, whose taste was classical and whose attitude toward Southey, Hunt, etc., was contemptuous, wrote his *Four Ages of Poetry*, Shelley, as Sidney had done two centuries earlier, felt it necessary to take up the cudgels for the art which he thought not only the highest of all the arts, but the most essential element in life. For poetry or imagination not only discovers new elements of truth and beauty, but it organizes and unifies those elements which are already known, and enables us to assimilate the multitudinous material and external factors in life which accumulate so rapidly that they almost overwhelm us. Moreover, during his travels Shelley was constantly surrounded with works of art which made various impressions upon him. Books were sent to him upon which he formed definite opinions. In the letters which he wrote he naturally attempted to describe the effects which these things had upon him, and to explain them if he could. Thus Shelley became a critic.

The hiatus between the creature of inspiration and imagination—the poet—and the rational, judicial person—the critic—is not so great in Shelley's case as one might at first suppose. No one can read the *Defense* without noting the imaginative and passionate quality of the language; the most phlegmatic reader would call it poetic prose. Richard Garnett, in his introduction to

a small volume of selected letters, pointed out the continuity which exists between Shelley's letters and his poetry, and that this was not true of his contemporaries. "Byron, for instance, writes verse like a poet, and prose like a man of the world. Shelley's letters are essentially and unmistakably the production of a poet, and compare with other celebrated letters precisely as his poems compare with other poetry. . . . The peculiar virtue of his letters is to express the mind of the poet. . . ." And this is even more true of the *Defense*; to some degree it is true of most of Shelley's prose.

## III

The critical tenets of the day (excepting the new voices of the Romanticists) were based upon authority and custom, just as were the social usages. Shelley would, of course, be as impatient of one as of the other, and we may expect to find him as liberal in matters of art as in religion and government. Yet, just as it is untrue to say that Shelley had no moral principles, so it would be incorrect to say that he had no critical principles. His Platonic idealism would tend to set up rather rigid standards for making judgments; and this is also true of other factors in his "system." Sentimentalism (Christian and later developments of it) and the enthusiasm and zeal for various "causes" could not fail to have decided effects on his scale of critical values. Also there was the skeptical element which tended to make his world subjective. If he could not reform the world about him, destroy evil in the universe, he could demolish the Jupiter which his own mind had permitted to



usurp power over itself, and so be free. No critic in Shelley's day could solve the metaphysical puzzle of *Prometheus*. Yet it was imaginative penetration of this sort, working according to the laws of thought, which Shelley demanded of the critics. Shelley's own note on *Frankenstein* is an attempt to evaluate a work of art according to psychological principles and natural laws, instead of according to the prevailing canons of taste. But, of course, in this attempt to get away from the caprices of taste, Shelley is often no more successful than were many of the reviewers.

His belief in ideal forms, in beauty which gives reality and form to otherwise chaotic and unintelligible elements, would incline him toward the belief that wherever beauty is, there must also be law. Yet the laws and principles by which works of art are created, explained, and evaluated are not empirically derived from objective, natural forms; imagination spontaneously draws them from its deep stores. The critic, just as the artist, must be able to apprehend intimations of the ideal forms of truth and beauty which lie behind the veil of appearances. This is what a sympathetic regard for works of art must have meant to Shelley, and what he seems to have attempted when writing about the pictures, statues, etc. which he saw in Italy. The possibility even of *rules* of criticism is admitted, in a speculative sort of way. Thus he wrote to Mrs. Gisborne from Florence that one of his chief objects in Italy was "the observing in statuary and painting the degree in which, *and the rules according to which, that ideal beauty, of which we*

*have so intense and yet so obscure an apprehension, is realized in external forms.*"<sup>1</sup>

The difficulty is a double one, for only the mystic can be satisfied that he has penetrated to the ultimate truth; and even if he were able to rest secure in his discovery, with no taint of the skepticism which Shelley was never long without, he would be unable to communicate his truth intact, and he would certainly be unable to formulate any rules which, with the accuracy of a chemical formula, would reproduce the revealed truth and beauty. What Shelley really gives us, in addition to the broad principles already noticed, is an indication of the method by which the critic should approach his task. One thing that he is very sure of is that we are not to condemn a work of art because it is not like other works, or because it does not represent a world which is like our conventional (but perhaps habitual and false) view of the earth and its inhabitants.

## IV

The critical remarks which he has left concerning works of art may be roughly divided into four sorts. There are (1) certain purely formalistic studies in which the critic tries to determine the effect of size and proportion upon our apprehension of beauty. Examples of this sort are his remarks upon architecture—buildings, colonnades, etc.—like the speculations concerning the temples at Paestum, the Pantheon, and St. Paul's, quoted in the chapter on beauty. Often the basis for his approval or disapproval is (2) external nature, or the ideal

<sup>1</sup> October 13, 1819.

(imaginative) world which the external, apparent world conceals. Here the metaphysical doctrines, and such physical and psychological laws as Shelley had learned from his rather extensive reading of the philosophers and poets, function so as to form more or less secure bases for judgment. Running through his critical utterances we find that (3) his interest in mankind and the amelioration of man's life colors most of it. This involves his social theory, and such ideas as he had from time to time upon religion. Here we encounter that strange union of arrogance toward the tyrannies in life and art and reverence for truth and beauty; of frankness that seems yet unaware of the fall of man, and of delicacy that is sometimes squeamish. Yet these ideas of virtue and taste form a third basis for his critical utterances. His broadest and most liberal basis for judgment of art is (4) the hedonistic, but this too has a foundation in the moral, i.e., the true and the beautiful. That art which gives us the greatest pleasure is of the highest order, though by pleasure we are to understand that the gratification of sense is too transitory to have value; that only pleasure of an intellectual and spiritual source has real value.

Shelley's own aim in writing poetry was, as he says, to produce "something wholly new and relative to the age, and yet surpassingly beautiful." In art, as in life, he wished to be an innovator; his interest in man and in truth required him to make his work relative to the life about him; his worship of beauty both as form and as idea made it imperative that the work conform as nearly as possible to the universal and timeless. Shelley had

much difficulty in making his own poems at once relative to the age, and universal and timeless as all beauty must be. Such poems as the *Mask of Anarchy* are too much of a time and place, and fall into that obvious didacticism which he rightly held to be a fault in art. Other works, such as the *Witch of Atlas* (though this cannot so readily be admitted) are said to be utterly remote from human interest, and so idealized as to have no meaning. Other qualities which he sought in great poetry were ease and power.

In the canto of *Don Juan* which Byron read to him in Ravenna (August, 1821) Shelley thought he saw all of the qualities which great poetry should have. He further declared that there was not a word in this canto of Byron's which the "most rigid asserter of the dignity of the human race would desire to see cancelled."<sup>2</sup> He praised Homer's epic of war and intrigues most highly among poems of the ancients, and Boccaccio he rated as one of the three great figures of the Middle Ages. He admired in Naples a sculpture of a satyr making love to a youth. These facts and many more which could be named, have seemed to some to be indicative of a non-moral attitude on Shelley's part.

But such is not the case. Byron's poetry he ranked very high not only because of the reasons given above, but also because of his sympathy with the spirit of revolt. In Shelley's opinion the *Cain* volume contained "finer poetry than has appeared in England since the publication of *Paradise Regained*."<sup>3</sup> Boccaccio's higher

<sup>2</sup> To Mary, August 9, 1821.

<sup>3</sup> To John Gisborne, April 10, 1822

ideas of social relations met Shelley's approval, as did his treatment of nature.

He is in a high sense of the word a poet, and his language has the rhythm and harmony of verse. . . . What descriptions of nature are there in his little introductions to every new day! It is the morning of life, stripped of that mist of familiarity which makes it obscure to us. Boccaccio seems to me to have possessed a deep sense of the fair ideal of human life, considered in its social relations. His more serious theories of love especially agree with mine. He often expresses things lightly too, which have serious meanings of a very beautiful kind. He is a moral casuist, the opposite of the Christian, stoical, ready-made, and worldly system of morals.<sup>4</sup>

When the ideas represented were evil, Shelley believed that the evil element might be absorbed, rendered innocuous, or transformed into good, as has already been described in chapter ii. In Byron's *Don Juan* and in Boccaccio's *Decameron* the expression of ideas in a light and humorous manner reconciles good and evil, so as to leave a final effect of happiness and of good; in Homer the reconciliation between the opposing elements of good and evil comes about through the "high and solemn close of the whole bloody tale in tenderness and inexpressible sorrow," which leaves the mind purged and purified. To Peacock, Shelley explains that his repugnance to the subject of the satyr making love to a youth was overcome by the "expressed life of the sculpture and the inconceivable beauty of the form of the youth."<sup>5</sup> A convincing and forceful representation combined with a su-

<sup>4</sup> To Hunt, September 27, 1819.

<sup>5</sup> December 22, 1818.

perhuman perfection of form results in a harmony of elements which is irresistible.

Shelley's strictures on Ariosto and Michelangelo were largely on the moralistic basis; partly because of their lack of restraint, of harmony, of idealized perfection. Concerning Ariosto he says, "Where is the gentle seriousness, the delicate sensibility, the calm and sustained energy, without which true greatness cannot be? He is so cruel, too, in his descriptions; his most prized virtues are vices almost without disguise. He constantly vindicates and embellishes revenge in its grossest form; the most deadly superstition that ever infested the world."<sup>6</sup> On Michelangelo he was even more severe: "He has not only no temperance, no modesty, no feeling for the just boundaries of art (and in these respects an admirable genius may err), but he has no sense of beauty, and to want this is to want the sense of the creative power of mind. What is terror without a contrast with, and a connexion with loveliness?"<sup>7</sup> Here he shows his maturer classical tendency. Beauty, as has been described in chapter vi, is harmony, the power which gives form and meaning to Chaos, and hence may be called the creative power. Shelley does not desire the terrible to be entirely removed from beauty; unrelieved he maintains that it can have no power. Its meaning is derived from contrast with beauty.

Apparently there is no possibility of agreement even among contemporary critics as to Shelley's own sense of form, of harmonious interrelation of parts, especially as

<sup>6</sup> To the Gisbornes, July 10, 1818.

<sup>7</sup> To Peacock, February 25, 1819.

it reveals itself in his poetry. Mr. Drinkwater<sup>8</sup> finds him rather lacking in the sense of form, though not quite ready to say there is none; Sir Edmund Gosse, on the contrary, finds that with all his modernity and disdain for the unessential, his poetry is of "the highest classical perfection. No one, among the moderns, has gone further than he in the just attention to poetic form."<sup>9</sup> Although his contemporaries disagreed as widely as did Wordsworth and Keats in their opinions of Shelley as an artist, it should be sufficiently clear from our analysis of Shelley's conception of beauty that he did have even a worshipful attitude toward form—both as the abstract idea of perfection and as law, or harmony of parts; that the very existence both of nature and of art he thought depended upon this concept. What success he had in making his poetry conform to his ideal is a just matter for disagreement. As Poe said, it is largely true that his poems are but the rough stenographic notes of the ideas in his mind; as Shelley himself said, "the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet."

That Shelley studied form, and that it was often baffling, we know. His preference for sculpture was owing to the fact that in the three-dimensional art the *form* was more apparent than in painting, and hence was easier to understand. He also knew that definite art forms, such as the Spenserian stanza, are less difficult to write than are the more simple, more subtle forms

<sup>8</sup> *The Muse in Council*, "Percy Bysshe Shelley "

<sup>9</sup> *Questions at Issue* (1892), p. 213.

such as blank verse. He tells us that he chose the stanza of Spenser for the *Revolt of Islam*, not because it was a "finer model of poetical harmony than the blank verse of Shakespeare and Milton, but because in the latter there is no shelter for mediocrity." His praise for Guido and his dislike for Michelangelo is explained partly on this basis. Guido is excellent in the more obvious elements of design, whereas Michelangelo is powerful but relatively crude and chaotic—undisciplined. Guido's subjects were often to Shelley's taste also; at least they seldom roused his sociological or religious animosities as did Michelangelo's "Moses" and "Jehovah." In his critical judgments, as in his poetry, Shelley insisted upon what to him seemed to be a moral representation of life. J. A. Symonds summarized his position thus: "Shelley, notwithstanding his profound study of style and his exquisite perception of beauty in form and rhythm, required more than merely artistic excellences in poetry. He judged poems by their content and spirit; and while he plainly expressed his abhorrence of the didactic manner, he held that art must be moralized in order to be truly great."<sup>10</sup> To be moral—as we have before observed—to Shelley meant to be true to an ideal truth which also produced pleasure. This was the doctrine which he advocated. But while he expressed his abhorrence of the didactic manner, his zeal for reform and his rather violent prejudices often led him into it, both in his poems and in his critical opinions on the works of others.

<sup>10</sup> Shelley, "E.M.L. Series," p. 112.



## INDEX

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## INDEX



## INDEX

- Abercrombie, Lascelles, 2 n.  
*Address to the Irish People*, 93  
*Adonais*, 74, 102, 103, 105, 107, 121, 163  
*Alastor*, 7, 66, 80, 86, 125, 166, 168, 170, 172, 174, 176, 177, 178  
Ariosto, 195  
Aristophanes, 168  
Aristotle, 49, 125 n., 153  
Arnold, Matthew, x, 2  
Art as imitation, 97 ff.
- Bacon, Francis, 131, 133  
Bagehot, Walter, 1, 72, 129, 174 n.  
Bates, E. S., 28  
Baynes, Thomas, 148  
Beauty: the sustaining power, 149; as utility, 152; as form-idea, 152; as subjective, 153; as objective idea, 156-77; the feminine symbols of, 163; as love, harmony, etc., 171; Shelley's veneration for, 174; and sublimity, 177-82  
Beauty and reform, 5  
Bentham, Jeremy, 147  
Berkeley, George, 11, 64, 82  
*Blackwood's Magazine*, x, 1  
Blake, William, 128  
Boccaccio, 156, 193  
Brooke, A. Stopford, 58 n.  
Burke, Edmund, 177, 180  
Burroughs, John, 105, 106  
Byron, 1, 18, 87, 100, 101, 103, 12, 145, 181, 189, 193, 194.
- Cain*, 18, 193  
Campbell, Olwin Ward, 37 n., 40 n., 79 n.
- Carlyle, Thomas, 147, 171, 183  
Carpenter (and Barnefield), 134 n.  
*Cenci, The*, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 42, 47, 49, 56, 103, 109, 121, 143  
*Charles the First*, 26, 30, 103, 117, 122  
Chaucer, 1, 146  
Christianity, 17, 18  
Claremont, Clare, 17, 65  
*Cloud, The*, 58, 70  
Clutton-Brock, A., 29 n., 37 n., 57 n., 68 n., 129 n., 157  
Coleridge, John Taylor, ix  
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 58, 80 n., 110  
Colvin, Sidney, 105  
Comedy, 50, 101  
Courthope, W. J., 58 n., 156 n.  
Criticism, 183; standards of, 189; method of, 191; types of, 191  
Croce, Benedetto, 140  
*Cyclops*, 140
- Daemon of the World*, 155, 178  
Dante, 128, 156 n.  
*Decameron*, 194  
*Defense of Poetry*, A, 2, 5, 14, 19, 20, 27, 42, 43, 44, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 56, 79, 103, 111, 119, 121, 131, 150, 153, 156, 173, 183, 185, 188  
*Dialogue*, A, 6  
Didacticism (def.), 3, 132-33  
*Don Juan*, 193, 194  
Dowden, Edward, x, 81 n., 105 n., 186

## 204 SHELLEY: HIS THEORY OF POETRY

- Drinkwater, John, 196  
 Dryden, John, 1, 59, 171 n.  
*Epipsychidion*, 43, 85, 86, 104, 150, 163, 165, 170, 179  
*Essay on Christianity*, 39 n.  
*Essay on Criticism* (Pope), 60  
*Essays and Letters*, 159  
*Evening, Ponte al Mare, Pisa*, 67  
 Evil in art. its nature, 36, 149; vanquished by truth, 41; involved in creation (the Fall), 43, 118; made tolerable by "sympathetic curiosity," 47; by the "tragic flaw," 49; by the comic, 50; by the pathetic, 51; the sublimation of pain, 52  
*Excursion*, 160 n.  
*Faust*, 47  
 Form in art, 127, 130, 195 ff.  
*Four Ages of Poetry*, 188  
*Frankenstein*, 52, 190  
 French Revolution, The, 7  
 Galsworthy, John, 51  
 Garnett, Richard, 188  
 Gisborne, Maria, 190  
*Godwin, William*, 5, 6, 19, 16, 39, 62, 65, 94, 114, 127, 159, 160  
 Goethe, 140  
 Gosse, Edmund, 121, 196  
 Grove, Harriet, 8, 61, 62  
 Guido, Reni, 186, 197  
 Hauptmann, Gerhard, 51  
 Hedonism, 14, 20, 192  
 Hegel, 70  
*Hellas*, 18 n., 36, 81, 87, 93, 103, 107, 110, 117  
 Heraclitus, 39  
 Hitchener, Elizabeth, 6, 11, 70  
 Hogg, Thomas Jefferson, 7, 8, 11, 24, 54 n., 61, 85, 110, 127  
 Holbach, 10  
 Homer, 193 ff.  
 Horace, 184  
 Hume, 89  
 Hunt, Leigh, 16, 18, 19, 24, 25, 82, 109, 188  
*Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, 12, 64, 104, 114, 156, 159-76  
 Imagination, 79, 103, 105-6, 111, 114, 126-27  
 Imitation, 97, 98, 106, 123  
 Incest, 48  
 Ingpen, Roger, 68 n.  
 Jack, A. A., 58 n.  
 James, William, 133, 161  
 Jeaffreson, John Cordy, 45  
*Jerusalem Liberata*, 122  
*Julian and Maddalo*, 24, 52, 53, 88, 103, 116, 150, 180  
 Kant, 129  
 Keats, 23, 105, 120, 143, 196  
 Kroder, A., 148 n.  
 Lamb, Charles, 1  
 Landor, Walter Savage, 145  
 Language of poetry, the, 141 ff.  
*Letter to Lord Ellenborough*, 42  
*Letter to Maria Gisborne*, 83, 117  
*Liberal*, 18  
*Life, fragment On*, 81-82  
*Lines Written among the Euganean Hills*, 80  
*Lines Written on Hearing the News of the Death of Napoleon*, 69  
 Lloyd, Charles, 82  
 Locke, John, 97, 111  
*London Literary Gazette*, ix, 1, 187  
 Longinus, 184  
*Love, fragment On*, 63  
 Love, produced by beauty, 171  
*Lyrical Ballads*, 54, 177

- Macaulay, T. B., 148, 163  
*Macbeth*, 54  
*Mask of Anarchy*, 5, 103, 107, 103  
 Materialism, 10, 18 n., 62, 94, 97  
 Mayol, J. B., 148 n.  
*Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci, On the*, 44  
 Medwin, Thomas, 31, 40, 96, 121, 122, 144 n., 147, 165, 177  
 Michelangelo, 195, 197  
 Milton, 1, 23, 37, 46, 119, 128, 144 n., 146, 197  
 Mind, its creative power, 81 ff., 87, 98, 116 ff., 138  
*Mont Blanc*, 66, 80, 81, 99  
 Moore, Thomas, 18, 126, 133 ff., 145, 161  
 Moral (def.), 2, 3  
 Moralism, 1, 13 ff., 19 ff.; 27 ff., 35-42, 108, 132, 192, 197  
 Morris, William, 57 n.  
 Mysticism, 80, 109, 185  
 Naturalism, 36, 63 ff.  
 Nature: its meaning at various times, 59 ff.; its effect on the poet, 65; reasons for its significance, 71; nature a veil, 71 ff.; a metaphysical notion of, 81 ff.; and beauty, 171-76  
 Nature myths, 75 ff.  
 Necessitarianism, 10 ff., 18 n., 52, 64, 66, 81, 87  
*Ode to Heaven*, 114  
*Ode to Liberty*, 79, 107, 114  
*Ode to Naples*, 42, 79 n., 107, 115, 175  
*Ode to the West Wind*, 4  
*On Life*, 81-82  
*On Love*, 63  
*Orlando Furioso*, 120  
*Paradise Lost*, 40 n., 46, 119, 139  
*Paradise Regained*, 193  
 Parker, D. H., 47 n.  
 Pathetic in art, the, 51  
 Peacock, Thomas Love, 17, 19, 25, 45, 65, 96 n., 108, 116, 117, 126, 154, 188, 194  
*Peter Bell the Third*, 45  
*Phaedrus*, 111, 160  
*Philosophical View of Reform*, 93  
 Plato, 5, 27, 40, 43, 47, 64, 72, 115, 129, 131, 149, 153, 159-76, 181, 185, 189  
 Plotinus, 43  
 Poe, 120, 196  
 Poetical beauty subordinate to moral, 14  
 Poetry: defined, 20, 98, 129, 131; its reconciling power, 53; its power to quell passion, 54 ff.; the product of mind and sensory material, 80, 99; as imitation, 98 ff., 106, 123; influence of the public, 100; as communication, 101, 108; as expression, 106-9; as inspiration, 111, 119; as imitation of the ideal, 115; as creation, 124, 138; its emotional basis, 124-27; its effect, 133-38; its language, 141-48  
*Political Justice*, 10 n., 62  
 Pope, 60  
*Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson, The*, 7  
*Prelude*, 99  
 Prescott, F. C., 72 n., 93 n., 113, 186  
*Prince Athanase*, 24, 10,  
*Prometheus Unbound*, ix, x, 23, 24, 27, 28, 37, 40, 45, 52, 66, 70, 79, 84, 90-95, 99, 104, 106, 116, 121, 130 n., 143, 150, 190  
*Quarterly Review*, ix, 1, 187  
*Queen Mab*, 9 ff., 20, 27 ff., 36 ff., 64, 81 ff., 122, 178  
*Question, The*, 62, 159, 164, 174  
 Ramée (Ouida), 57  
 Raphael, 116



## 206 SHELLEY: HIS THEORY OF POETRY

- Rapin, René, 59  
Reason, 103, 110, 111, 128-29  
Revision, value of, 118-22  
*Revolt of Islam*, x, 4, 11, 13, 15, 20, 24, 27 ff., 39 ff., 42 ff., 64, 66, 86, 88, 93, 101, 103, 114, 118, 121 ff., 142 ff., 149 ff., 172, 179, 197  
Rhythm, 130  
*Rosalind and Helen*, 17, 24, 29, 137  
Rousseau, 54, 55, 63  
Ruskin, 75  
Rymer, Thomas, 52  
*St. Irvyne*, 62  
Salt, Henry, x, xi, 72 n., 81 n., 103 n.  
Sarrazin, G., 61 n.  
Schiller, 40  
Scott, Walter, 13  
*Sensitive Plant*, 52, 75, 83, 120  
Sentimentalism 36, 178, 189  
Shakespeare, x, 24, 128, 172 n., 197  
Shelley, Harriet, 103  
Shelley, Mary, 17, 18, 30, 129  
Shelley, Percy Bysshe: as an artist, 118-21, 195; his attitude toward comedy, 50, 101; attitude toward nature, 57, 60, 63, 69 ff., 115, a broader view of poetry, 21-27, 109, 132; contacts with life, 67 ff., 102; the dedicated spirit, 11, 63; as a dramatist, 23-31, 49, 103, 109; in early reviews, ix, x; grasp of fact, 92, 103; hatred of intolerance, 8; his hedonism, 14, 20, 192; interest in science, 6; and the materialists, 10, 18 n., 62, 96; his moralism, x, 13 ff., 19 ff., 27-42, 108, 132, 197; his mysticism, 80, 109, 126, 133-38, 161, 185; nature myths, 75; and necessity, 10 ff., 18, 64, 66 n., 81, 87; the perfectibilist, 88; his Platonism, 27, 40, 43, 115, 149, 156, 159-76, 189; powers of observation, 62-66; his radicalism, 17; his reading public, 106-8, scientific point of view, 69-70, his skepticism, 61, 81, 83, 96; his subjective idealism, 45, 72, 74, 81, 87, 94, 104, 150; his transcendentalism, 39, 64, 88, 94, 96, 103 ff., 126-28; veneration for beauty, 174 ff., among the Victorians, x, xi, and women, 163 ff.  
Shore, Arabella, 103 n.  
Sidney, 125 n., 131, 179  
Skepticism, 61, 81 ff., 96, 183  
*Skylark*, 53, 104  
Socrates, 111, 159, 160, 161, 185  
*Solitary, The*, 6  
*Sonnet: Political Greatness*, 160  
Southey, 16, 145, 146, 188  
Spenser, 23, 144 n., 146, 196, 197  
Spinoza, 64, 129  
Stawell, F. Melian, 160 n.  
Stephen, Leslie, 57, 84  
Subjective idealism, 45, 81-89, 94, 104, 150  
Sublime, the, 177 ff.  
*Sublime and the Beautiful*, 177-82  
Sweet, Henry, 76, 109  
*Swellfoot the Tyrant*, 103  
Swinburne, 148 n.  
Symonds, J. A., 24 n., 68 n., 72 n., 133 n., 148, 197  
*Symposium*, 140, 159  
Tasso, 23, 73, 112, 113, 122  
*Thalaba*, 146  
Thompson, A. Hamilton, 72  
Time in poetry, 92  
*To Jane: The Invitation*, 172  
Todhunter, John, 29 n., 70, 90, 109  
Transcendentalism, 39, 64, 88, 96, 103 ff., 122-28  
Translation, 139-41  
Trelawny, E. J., 122, 147, 181

- Triumph of Life*, 54, 96, 108, 160 n ,  
165
- Turner, J. M. W., 106
- Unfinished Drama*, 71, 75, 178
- Victor and Cazire*, 7
- War, 7
- Winstanley, Lilian, 171 n.
- Witch of Atlas*, 108, 121, 165, 193
- Wordsworth, 1, 16, 55, 58, 70, 72,  
99, 100, 101, 121, 143, 144 n.,  
159, 178, 184, 188, 196
- Zastrozzi*, 62
- Zucca, The*, 104, 158, 162, 174

